

## 5. Pop and Politics

Risks. They're what anyone seeking to get new voters to the polls will have to take. The old methods of mobilizing voters aren't working anymore, especially for younger Americans.

In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam charts the decline of "social capital," the invisible bonds between Americans. In the past twenty-five years, Americans have become 33 percent less likely to have dinner as a family, 45 percent less likely to have friends over, and 58 percent less likely to attend club meetings. We are at least 25 percent less likely to attend church. And, yes, we are a quarter less likely to vote. For economic and lifestyle reasons, more of us end up uprooting our lives and moving to different communities. In fact, 20 percent of Americans move *every* year. "For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities," writes Putnam, "but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century."<sup>1</sup>

If that's the case (and there's plenty of evidence to support Putnam's theory) then what *does* hold Americans together? In our media-saturated society, pop culture has become a powerful link between us. We may not live in the same neighborhoods or have the same creed, color, or income, but virtually all Americans consume television and other media. More Americans have televisions than telephones.<sup>2</sup> Television celebrities are treated like American royalty (witness the insane amount of media coverage of the last season of *Friends*). And "reality television," in which not-so-average Americans get a shot at the big time, is a national obsession. In fact, Americans watch an average of four to five hours of television a day, even more for people of color and low-income families.<sup>3</sup> We also spend an average of two hours a day listening to the radio and an hour and a half each day online. All of this media consumption creates a web of cultural connections. It gives us a sense of who we are, who our peers are, and who we wish we could

be. For example, my friends and I, some of the now thirtysomething members of “Generation X,” tried to act and dress like the musicians we saw on shows like *Friday Night Videos* and early MTV.

MTV also spawned the popular Choose or Lose political series and has supported the nonprofit Rock the Vote. (Rock the Vote helped push through the Motor Voter registration act.) And other youth-oriented media outlets have dabbled or dived into politics as well, from *Vibe*, *Spin*, and *Rolling Stone* to in-school television network Channel One.

More recently, comedy shows have jumped on the political bandwagon. Leno, Letterman, Conan, and *Saturday Night Live* all regularly do political material. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* has made a franchise out of it. In one bit, Stewart had President George W. Bush debate “the one man we believe has the insight and the *cojones* to stand up to him . . . Texas governor and Presidential candidate, George W. Bush.” Stewart proceeded to pair clips from Bush’s presidency with clips from his campaign. For example:

Jon Stewart: Mr. President, let me just get specific. Why are we in Iraq?

President Bush: Well, umm . . . we will be changing the regime of Iraq . . . for the good of the Iraqi people.

Stewart: Governor, then I’d like to hear your response on that.

Governor Bush: If we’re an arrogant nation, then they’ll resent us. I think one way for us to end up being viewed as the Ugly American is to go around the world saying, “We do it this way, so should you.”

Stewart: Well, that’s an excellent point. I don’t think you can argue with that! Mr. President, so is the idea to just build a new country that we like better?

**President Bush:** We will tear down the apparatus of terror, and we will help build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free.

**Governor Bush:** I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called "nation building."

Programs like the *Daily Show* aren't just amusement to their viewers. A poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 21 percent of eighteen to twenty-nine-year-olds turned to comedy shows for political information. Only 23 percent turned to the network news. (That's down from 39 percent four years ago.)<sup>4</sup>

And then there's the link between celebrity and political organizing. Celebrities not only endorse a bevy of different charities, many of them took very public stands on the war in Iraq. Bruce Willis supported the war and offered a million-dollar reward for Saddam Hussein's capture, while the *West Wing's* Martin Sheen, who plays the president of the United States, spoke at antiwar rallies. The wildly successful online activism portal MoveOn.org leveraged the power of celebrity to launch Bush in 30 Seconds, a contest to get their audience to film thirty-second advertisements critiquing the president. Howard Stern declared that any guests on his show—yes, even the parade of chesty strippers—have to be registered to vote. And stars including Madonna and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs have made ads and headlined rallies encouraging young people to vote. (Of course, at the time neither was registered.)

All of the celebrity glitz and glitter cannot mask what most young Americans believe about politics: in addition to being mean-spirited and corrupt, it's dry and boring. If you happen to catch a session of Congress on CSPAN, you'll see a bunch of men, most of them white, and a smattering of women, all dressed like corporate executives. They seem to spend as much time debating obscure procedural points as focusing on the issues. Political junkies like me may be willing to put up with this tedium, but most people would probably rather get a root canal. Adding celebrities to the mix will definitely get young Americans' attention. But will they ultimately bring new voters to the polls? A new movement of hip hop-generation activists is trying to prove that they can—and that they can swing elections in the process.

## Hip Hop Generation Activism

On a gray, rainy day in June 2003, several thousand young people gathered near New York's city hall. Onstage: rappers Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, Fat Joe, dead prez, and 50 Cent; singer Mariah Carey; actors Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins; politicians Mark Green, Andrew Cuomo, and Alan Hevesi; and music impresarios Damon Dash and Russell Simmons, the latter of whom organized the event. The cause: repealing the Rockefeller Drug Laws, draconian statutes that paved the way for federal mandatory minimum sentences.

The rally was not only a case of strange bedfellows but a turning point in politics. Since the early days of hip hop, grassroots activists have used the music and culture to reach young people. Now, music icons are trying to help lead a voter-mobilization movement aimed at the hip hop generation. For example, the Rockefeller Drug Law event was co-sponsored by Russell Simmons's Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), which announced a goal of registering 2 million new voters in 2004.

Hip hop politics tends to mix flash and substance. The most heartfelt speaker at the Rockefeller Drug Law event was not a celebrity but a mother of four, Elaine Bartlett, who was sentenced to twenty years to life for her first and only time transporting cocaine. "I spent sixteen years in jail, and I don't know a single [drug] kingpin," said Bartlett at the rally. (Bartlett has become a national symbol of the failed drug war. In March 2004, journalist Jennifer Gonnerman's book on Bartlett and the prison system, *Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett*, made the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*.) Still, most young people at the rally probably showed up to see 50 Cent, not Elaine Bartlett.

Other hip hop generation organizations have used the celebrity/activist formula as well. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement hosts an annual Black August concert in New York for human rights and political prisoners. In 2003, artists including Erykah Badu, Talib Kweli, and dead prez performed. And author Kevin Powell, a celebrity in his own right, joined with cultural entrepreneur April Silver to host a series of community forums, *Hip Hop Speaks!*

## What is Hip Hop, Anyway?

To some of us, hip hop is like air: so pervasive it's invisible. To others it's utterly foreign. At one political conference, I met an eighty-year-old white teacher who volunteered in prisons. He knew that his students listened to hip hop, but he didn't really know what it was and certainly didn't listen to it. As a thirty-four-year-old African-American, I can remember when hip hop didn't exist—just barely. By the time I was in second grade, the hot, sticky Baltimore summers pulsed with the new sounds of songs like “Planet Rock” and “Rapper’s Delight.” Adventurous, showy, and more than a little goofy, early hip hop turned the music world on its ear. Like many people my age, I can name a hip hop artist for every stage of my life, from the roller-rink jams by the Sugarhill Gang in elementary school through the crushworthy LL Cool J in junior high; from black power groups like Public Enemy in college to Tupac’s ghetto philosophizing in my early working years. And like many others of my generation, I’ve been disappointed that hip hop’s commercial success seems to have eclipsed its politics and sense of history.

Hip hop isn’t just the pop rap we hear on the radio today. When I explain hip hop to people who don’t know it (or even like it), I point out the art-form’s four elements: graffiti art, MCing (rapping), DJing (turntablism), and breakdancing. Hip hop began in New York City, a fusion of Jamaican-style “toasting” (or MCing) with urban American music, lyrical themes, and rhythms. Graffiti: think the colorful subway cars in New York in the ’70s and ’80s, and the graffiti mural art of today. Breakdancing or b-boying now influences everything from popular dance to Broadway musicals. And even though today’s flash and glamour may eclipse content, hip hop has always been political. Given that it sprang from the creativity and disfranchisement of urban black and Latino youth, how could it not be? Or as Public Enemy frontman Chuck D put it, hip hop is “the black CNN.”<sup>5</sup>

Hip hop is a multibillion dollar industry, a global phenomenon, a street-corner pastime, a cry for action, and one of the great inventions of the twentieth century. As rapper and actor Mos Def puts it in his song “Hip Hop”:

We went from picking cotton  
 To chain gang line chopping  
 To Be-Bopping  
 To Hip-Hopping . . .

Hip Hop will simply amaze you  
 Craze you, pay you  
 Do whatever you say do  
 But, Black, it can't save you<sup>6</sup>

Well, it's saved—or at least enriched—some people. The rap and hip hop industry has produced a new cadre of multimillionaires, including Russell Simmons. It has taken a place alongside basketball as the ultimate ghetto-aspirational career. It has been both unfairly and fairly blamed for violence ranging from the post-Rodney King violence in Los Angeles to the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. Rap has spawned a new genre of bitch/ho lyrics and produced female megastars including Missy Elliott and Queen Latifah. It has gone from underground phenomenon to black pop culture to a multiracial and even global cultural juggernaut.

But is it a movement?

Yes, argues Bakari Kitwana, author of the seminal *Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis of African American Culture* and one of the organizers of the June 2004 National Hip Hop Political Convention. (The convention occurred after this book was completed.) Kitwana sees hip hop activists as the rightful heirs of civil rights generation leadership. Civil rights leaders have “been fighting and they deserve to see something that builds on their work,” he says. “This is the opportunity to see their dreams fulfilled.” To Kitwana, the emerging hip hop political movement takes several forms:

1. Grassroots activism by groups including the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the Center for Young Women's Development, LISTEN, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, and the 21st Century Leadership Movement
2. An electoral politics component, including political action committees, think tanks, and hip hop generation politicians Kwame Kilpatrick (mayor of Detroit), Ras Baraka (Newark, New Jersey, deputy mayor), and Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. of Illinois.

3. A student activist movement of hip hop clubs that host campus lectures and forums.
4. The spoken word and underground hip hop movement.

"Hip hop, having been promoted with our collective image as a generation, has to give something back," says Kitwana. "The most effective way is to move hip hop into the arena of politics. The questions: who's the power broker and what's the agenda?"

Russell Simmons and his Hip-Hop Summit Action Network are indisputably the best-known and best-financed of the power brokers. Simmons founded the group in 2001 to help mediate the rap culture wars. It moved into voter registration in 2003. Simmons is a big personality in the vein of Donald Trump, with flash, dazzle, and ostentatious displays of wealth. (The show *MTV Cribs* toured his palatial home, which includes a separate bathroom in his wife's walk-in closet.) In a cover story, *Business Week* named Simmons "The CEO of Hip Hop."

Simmons's story parallels the rise of hip hop from urban artistry to international phenomenon. The forty-six-year-old has earned his millions several times over. Simmons started Def Jam Records in the early 1980s with rock promoter Rick Rubin. Their star act was none other than rappers Run-DMC, led by Simmons's younger brother Joey (Run). In 1985, Sony began to distribute Def Jam records, bringing them a much wider audience.

Simmons and Rubin sold Def Jam to Universal Music in 1999 for at least \$100 million. Then Simmons launched a fashion label, Phat Farm, and a women's wear line, Baby Phat, run by his twenty-seven-year-old wife, former model Kimora Lee Simmons. In early 2004, Simmons sold Phat Fashions for \$140 million. Now he's fielding the Def Comedy Jam series; Def Poetry Jam, which won a Tony award in 2003; an energy drink; and even a credit card. And finally there's that small matter of trying to overturn the Rockefeller Drug Laws and register 2 million voters.

In other words, Simmons is the man who branded hip hop. But can he sell politics to the hip hop generation?

"Hip hop has always been political," says Simmons. "People have to realize that not voting is voting." He also believes that musicians are the best messengers. The HSAN has begun hosting a series of forums across the country—Houston, New York, Chicago—all of them featuring major artists and aiming

for large crowds. It does voter registration through the summits and collects contact information—two-ways, cell phones, pagers, email—so that it can encourage newly registered youth to vote. “I am trying to reach everyone who is connected to hip hop,” Simmons says, pointing out that people from their forties down through their teens identify with the music. “The real rainbow coalition is now. We got Asians, Latinos, and compassionate and poor whites who have been separated systematically. Eminem sponsored our hip hop conference in New York. There are hundreds of thousands of people in Detroit who look like him and think like us.”

Simmons doesn't shy away from associating with controversial artists like Eminem or 50 Cent. He also went to bat for Ludacris, who was dropped by Pepsi after an outcry about the rapper's lyrics. Pepsi then agreed to a \$3 million settlement that benefited groups like the HSAN. Some critics say that defending Ludacris's lyrics, rather than focusing on issues like violence and racism, is the wrong use of time and money. Simmons says that the controversy was a chance for young people to “win something.”

The HSAN's political director, Yale-educated political scientist, professor, and writer Alexis McGill, acknowledges that bringing controversial stars to bat for voting is “a contradiction,” but argues that the summit creates a space for conversation where contradictions can be reconciled. McGill calls the rise of hip hop activism “a perfect storm”: a result of the botched election in Florida, the failure of the Bush administration to connect with young urban voters, the economy, and young Americans' desire “to be a part of a movement.” She adds, “Russell probably would have just done summits, but people kept asking for more.” Thus the HSAN is attempting to evolve into a true membership-based organization, a hub which connects with local organizers at the grassroots and major media partners to disseminate its message. “If we turn out a million people every Tuesday to buy a record,” she says, “we can turn out twenty million on election day.”

Simmons's organization is willing to do some unusual coalition building. Its voter registration efforts are a partnership with World Wrestling Entertainment, formerly the World Wrestling Federation. As the HSAN puts it in a press release, “If war, terrorism, and a recession aren't enough to persuade the under-30 crowd to vote, maybe hip-hop stars and wrestlers can do it.”<sup>7</sup>

But some long-term activists are skeptical that star-power alone will bring young people to the polls. "Power brokers need to be people who didn't become activists yesterday," says Kitwana. "There needs to be collaboration between grassroots activists and members of the hip hop community." The National Hip Hop Political Convention aims to bring together delegates from across the nation, each of whom pledges to register at least fifty voters in their home districts. These delegates will construct a political platform and press politicians to deliver on it. Unlike the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, whose leader is indisputably Simmons, the convention has a wider array of co-organizers. Convention organizer Baye Wilson believes that "One reason young people have turned off to electoral politics is that the issues do not resonate. This will bring up the issues that are most important to them: education, criminal justice, economic development."

How can hip hop connect citizens with the political process? On a very basic level, hip hop generation activists will have to turn a cultural affiliation into a political affiliation. Instead of "hip hop" equating to the kind of jeans you wear, the attitude you cop, or even the rhymes you spit, it will have to mean a way of thinking about the world and interacting with—and claiming—power. One of the most potent aspects of hip hop is its effortless shorthand, its way of transmitting a whole range of cultural signifiers at once. But hip hop's political platform is not as crisp or well-defined as its aesthetics. Given cynicism about politics and the lack of civic education in schools, many young Americans have only a rudimentary understanding of how the government works. Some don't want anything to do with politics. Nor do most members of the hip hop generation know how to band together as a voting bloc and leverage their collective power. Wilson and the other organizers of the convention hope to change that.

Instead of reaching citizens directly, the convention will focus on bringing together activist-leaders who are already invested in their communities, particularly in key battleground states. "Five hundred people could come out and go back and organize in five hundred communities. That would be phenomenal," says Wilson. "Or we could have thirty-thousand people come and just see artists and that would be disappointing." He hopes to model the convention on the 1972 National Black Political Convention. Thousands of African-Americans, ranging from Julian Bond to Barbara Jordan to Minister Louis Farrakhan, gathered in Gary, Indiana, to set a political agen-

da for the black community. They announced goals ranging from a national healthcare system to home rule for the District of Columbia. And although most of those goals have not yet been met, the Gary convention provided a launching pad for the election of black officials.

Most hip hop generation activists, including the convention's organizers, are African-American. But they see their constituency as multiracial, even global. "With hip hop you have in some ways Martin Luther King's idea of cross-cultural engagement. [And] if we're effective with hip hop as a multicultural movement, older white people will be less afraid," says Kitwana, whose latest book is *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*. "On a real fundamental level I believe hip hop is the voice of oppressed people," says April Silver, president of the lecture agency Akila Worksongs and co-founder of the Hip Hop Speaks! series. "And being oppressed is a universal craziness. It's not just here in New York City or the United States. The universality of hip hop is the fight for freedom and self-expression."

But, to return to the central question, does that make a movement? A movement has to have clear, well-defined goals that are broad enough to inspire large groups of people but not vague. They also have to have institutional infrastructure, like membership organizations.

"I don't see a cohesive movement," says Yvonne Bynoe, the president of Urban Think Tank and the author of *Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture*. "Some people say there are too many issues on the table, we're never going to have that [cohesive movement like the civil rights movement] again. Other people say we possibly do need something along the lines of an NAACP or SCLC for our generation. I would advocate a national structure with autonomous local entities."

One organization attempting precisely that strategy is the League of Independent Voters, a progressive political mobilization project targeting the young and disaffected. The League, which has a partner voter-education organization, the League of Young Voters, hosts small brunches that bring politics into a comfortable space. These brunches and other events are publicized online. "Our online network is a Friendster or Tribe type network," says co-founder Adrienne Maree Brown, referring to "six-degrees-of separation" web networks that link like-minded people. Online networking became a hallmark of former Vermont governor Howard Dean's campaign for president, as well as the activism of MoveOn.org.

The league is printing progressive voter guides and has published a book, *How to Get Stupid White Men Out of Office*. “We’re focused on 2004 but also on the long term,” says Brown. “We have a fifty-year plan. Next year, our organizing will pull people together from across the country and [get] them to organize in blocs instead of being alone.”

## Independent Voters, High Stakes

The league’s choice of the word “independent” is strategic. Younger voters of all races are more likely to see themselves as independents than older voters. A study of fifteen- to twenty-five-year-olds commissioned by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship found that a quarter of youth considered themselves independent, and fifteen percent do not know what party they identify with.<sup>8</sup> These independents come from all races:

Latino youth:

31% Democrat, 25% independent, 24% Republican, 21% don’t know

Black youth:

43% Democrat, 23% independent, 16% Republican, 19% don’t know

White youth:

30% Democrat, 25% independent, 31% Republican, 14% don’t know

But “independent” is not the same as “swing voter.” In a two-party system, many registered “independents” reject both major parties.

David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies finds the voting patterns of young independents “troubling,” and says it’s a particular dilemma for communities of color. The African-American population is significantly younger than the white population, with a median age of thirty versus thirty-nine for whites. The Latino population is even younger, with a median age of twenty-six.<sup>9</sup> The more young voters in a population, the more “independent” voters there are. The more “independent” voters, the less likely they are to be mobilized to vote. “Voter registration is not the issue,” says Bositis. “The issue is getting people to vote. . . . What has

happened in the past in terms of the hip hop generation is that they've just not voted at all."

And what *will* motivate the hip hop generation to vote? Personality, says Bositis. "Clinton was a personality who attracted the hip hop generation and younger African-Americans generally," he states. "The right personality is not going to be one of the current [2004] crop of presidential candidates. It's going to be somebody who has a rapport and a connection and members of the hip hop generation say, 'Hey, this person is cool.'" Bositis believes that entertainment personalities and other public figures can motivate young voters, but they have to spark real interest. Traditional civil-rights issues and organizations don't necessarily resonate with the hip hop generation. "People like [President Lyndon B.] Johnson and Martin Luther King are as far in the past for this generation as George Washington," he says.

So is a popular entertainment figure like Simmons the right person to lead the hip hop political movement? "The goals of a Russell Simmons are going to be hugely different from the goals of someone who is not a multi-millionaire. That's just real," says Akila Worksongs' Silver. "Russell has done a great job of using his power and influence towards educating people. But he's also working to protect his empire." For Silver, the issue is how well people work together. "Are people in their corners doing different things? Yeah—and that's not always bad," she says. What hurts is infighting. "There's enough oppression for all of us" to fight, Silver says.

But before hip hop-generation activists can fight oppression, they have to battle internal misogyny. Silver, as a prominent female entrepreneur who started hosting hip hop forums when she was a student at Howard University, has seen enough to last her a lifetime. "I've been confronted by sexism," she says. "It's a huge challenge. Here I am a strong advocate for a culture that hates women. I have continued to be the advocate I have because I believe there is something more powerful in hip hop than the sexism. And I don't let men get away with dumb shit."

Other activists point out that the misogyny in hip hop has deep roots. Jeff Johnson, former youth director for the NAACP and CEO of Speaking Truth to Power, says misogyny has been learned from older generations, even from the church. "There are some places where woman still cannot be in the pulpit," he says. "Hip hop is the child of that generation's culture." Concludes National Hip Hop Convention organizer James Bernard, who

helped found seminal hip hop magazines *XXL* and the *Source*, “We have to take hip hop back.”

Many organizers believe that taking hip hop back from misogynist rappers and exploitative corporations has to go hand-in-hand with developing a viable political culture. “I remember a time when there wasn’t a hip hop,” says Bernard, who is also an adept fundraiser for the new movement. “People I’m speaking to now, they don’t remember that. They don’t remember a time when the music used to be more diverse and well-rounded.”

In fact, much commercial hip hop these days is uninspired if not outright destructive. Rapper Busta Rhymes made a hit of a de facto liquor commercial with “Pass the Courvoisier.” Eminem, the first white rapper with street cred, was embraced by the mainstream media in ways that equally controversial black rappers never were. The original (hardcore) version of his breakthrough song “My Name Is” contains lyrics about “raping lesbians, while they screamin’ at me: ‘Let’s just be friends!’” And in his hit song “P.I.M.P.,” rapper 50 Cent rhymes:

I’m bout my money you see, girl you can holla at me  
 If you fucking with me, I’m a P-I-M-P  
 Not what you see on TV, no Cadillac, no greasy  
 Head full of hair, bitch I’m a P-I-M-P<sup>10</sup>

Of course, many of these songs are accompanied by the obligatory soft porn-style video shoot, full of gyrating black female asses and preening men. “When hip hop became pop music, it became lowest-common-denominator,” says Bernard. “Any artist who didn’t sell three million records was a failure. . . . [But hip hop is still] very vibrant, very grassroots as a culture. It’s important for us to define for ourselves what this culture means to us.” Despite the way that so much mainstream rap has sold the generation’s experiences for false gold, the hip hop soundtrack is a parallel to lived experiences. Or as Dilated Peoples rhymes: “My lyrics take care of me/they therapy/get shit off my chest.”<sup>11</sup>

If hip hop generation activists have a say in the matter, the artform and the politics will grow and flourish together. But how much can hip hop generation activism succeed if the two major parties are resistant to new voices and voters?

