



South African hip-hop music: reflections on youth culture and socio-politics

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“... And since we all came from a woman

Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman

I wonder why we take from our women

Why we rape our women — do we hate our women?

I think it's time to kill for our women

Time to heal our women, be real to our women

And if we don't we'll have a race of babies

That will hate the ladies that make the babies

And since a man can't make one

He has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one

So will the real men get up?

I know you're fed up, ladies, but keep ya head up...”

(Part of a verse from 2 Pac Shakur's “Keep Ya Head UP”, 1993)

Engaging with 2Pac's body of work is an extraordinary experience. Without over-romanticizing about his contribution to global hip hop culture and socio-political discourse, one cannot deny the sheer awareness he possessed of his surroundings; the socio-economic hardships, injustices, and political persecution which beset his community at the time- poor, marginalized, black citizens in the “ghettos” of the United States (US). Not only the negatives, but also their talents, skills, hopes, and aspirations. This awareness was/is astutely and powerfully captured and articulated through his music and writings, notably among others through modern classics such as this very gem “Keep Ya Head Up”, which he dedicated to all disempowered, abused, violated and hopeless black women, as a call to literally keep their heads up, to keep loving and celebrating themselves and to see for themselves lives beyond their immediate limiting environments within which they were demeaned at every turn. There are many other seminal 2Pac classics, of course, through which the young rapper voiced his preoccupations about the condition of black people in the US (and position of women in particular) within a political and economic system which excluded and oppressed them such as: “Dear Mamma”, “Brenda's Got a Baby”, “Baby Don't Cry”, “To My Unborn Child”, “White Man's World”, “Changes”, “I wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto”, “To Live and Die in LA” etc.

In light of the latest scenes of horrific and excessive violence bombarding South African (SA) news media, characterized primarily by abhorrent atrocities against (young) women and children; one can't take in the message behind "Keep Ya Head Up" and not just appreciate- in awe- how foretelling this ode to black women would be for the dire context our country presently finds itself. In that moment all thoughts naturally drifted to one pertinent question: what role, if any, can SA hip-hop artists and rappers play (just as 2Pac did so cogently within his own context) to emphatically challenge the most pressing societal issues in our country; to add voice to the plight of poor, marginalized, disillusioned, and distraught young people in SA- and women in particular. What role can these influential young artists of today play in underlining and advancing the needs and interests of the disenfranchised majority? What could be their role in championing music and campaigns that challenge the types of attitudes manifesting in the femicide scourge?

There's a common stereotype within the country that youth lacks interest in politics and broader societal issues. This is a notion supported by the latest South African Social Attitudes Survey which found that of those in the 16-19 and the 20-24 age group more than a quarter (29%) said they were interested in politics. This apathy, however, is said to not be exclusively South African phenomenon and can be found in other regions of the world. An important point made in the Survey, however, is that there is appetite amongst young people to engage public issues or those that affect them as shown by the student protests: Rhodes Must Fall (#RhodesMustFall) and Fees Must Fall (#FeesMustFall) as clear examples. In the absence of formal platforms to engage on prevailing socio-political and economic issues, young people have gravitated towards other democratic and creative ways to express their positions.

Given that research confirms that the young people of SA consume more music than any other age group, and within a broader context on the hip-hop music genre and considering the idiosyncrasies of SA society, what then is this distinct cultural, socio-economic and political function of hip hop music? SA society is faced by a host of serious and stubborn challenges which manifest along race, class and gender lines as poverty, inequality, unemployment, service delivery, public maladministration; and even racism, classism and sexism themselves. Sadly, at the epicenter of the chronic unemployment challenge which currently hovers around the 27% mark, are the country's most precious resource- the youth. This is desperately tragic and has been linked to social ills such as substance abuse, rampant youth pregnancy rates, disillusionment and displaced frustration, violent crime and a general lack of hope in the prevailing political system. The gross violence meted daily against the vulnerable in society is unacceptable, it is an abuse of human rights of the worst order. It does not seem too far-fetched, therefore, to imagine that that SA hip-hop has a responsibility to use its soaring popularity, prominence and influence in our social landscape to represent these millions of silent voices; to highlight the persisting hardships and injustices faced by black people in general and women in particular, to question the status quo in search of lasting solutions, and promote positive values amongst young people so as to conscientise and rally the youth around sound values as equality, the rule of law; human rights, women's rights, children's rights, rights of the LGBTI community; and basic socio-economic rights. In the same breath and very importantly the responsibilities that come with them.

Of course, when one takes a serious look at mainstream SA hip-hop, it would be disingenuous to suggest that the music is completely devoid of a social consciousness. In fact, it is easily visible in the lyrics, videos, and general lifestyles of some of the prominent figures in the SA hop-hop scene, which represents primarily young black youth who are (rightfully so) very bold in expressing their class aspirations and ambitions to escape the general trappings of poverty. And as their dreams gradually come to fruition as evinced by generous incomes, lucrative endorsement/sponsorship/performance deals, music awards etc; they mark and celebrate these career milestones with the same conspicuousness we are used to seeing in their US counterparts. This is good and well, excellence has to be celebrated. And young, black, successful girls and boys in the arts can be expected to be and act their age, naturally.

However, within our context; all life, all experiences happen within a particularly potent socio-economic and political context that demands of leaders in all spheres of society to not address social consciousness and rootedness in the real SA context superficially. It would then seem that in today's society, we could do with our own 2pac right now.

In conclusion, the young artists of today should learn and take the baton from legendary SA artists such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Brenda Fassie, Johnny Glegg/Juluka and Savuka, Letta Mbulu, Caiphus Semenya, Jabu Khanyile, Zola 7, Arthur Mofokate, Oscar Mdlongwa, Bongo Maffin, Trompies, Alaska to name a few that spring to mind. These are but examples of powerful women and men who not only entertained the country and the world through their music, but, who at the time when history called upon it, discharged their power and influence as artists to speak for those who had no voice, question social injustice, fight against political oppression, advocate for basic rights and freedoms, and generally depict the prevailing societal frustrations and hopes.

So as SA faces increasing affliction in the social, political and economic landscape etc, may all men, whatever their spheres of influence, also reflect and do something regarding the plight faced by SA women today and heed 2Pac's call "in Keep Ya Head Up"!