

Taking rap to task

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A FORUM Saturday renewed my hope that it's possible to cut out the cancerous part of the hip-hop music culture and preserve its artistic energies. Diligence and heavy doses of imagination can make a difference.

It could have turned into just another forum on black problems. But this one was unique in the way it forced 150 members of the Paterson community to examine an issue everyone in America is wrestling with -- the enormous social impact of hip-hop music -- and at least take a stab at recommending a course of action.



The suggested remedies ran the gamut from boycotting the parent companies and their products to developing a strategy that corporate entertainment executives, distributors, stockholders and the rappers feel in their wallets.

The hip-hop industry needs to wash its collective mouth out with soap.

Don Imus made the assumption that hip-hop gave him license to repeat offensive phrases. That led him to slander Rutgers' women basketball players earlier this year.

Imus' insults cut close to the bone here in basketball player Essence Carson's hometown, where schoolmates at arts-oriented Rosa Parks High knew her as a pianist who played three other instruments, too. During basketball season she went across town, scoring for Eastside High School with the same concentration and virtuosity that she gave to her music. She ran track and played volleyball, a young woman of stellar character.

Constructive change

The Saturday forum organized by BROTHERS (Brothers Reaching Out to Help Everyone Rebuild Self) was helping the community extract something constructive from the April Imus flap.

Copycat parroting of black language got Imus in trouble. His fall from corporate grace in April put the spotlight on rappers' demeaning, degrading and violent language.

During the three-hour workshop, organizers showed how hip-hop performers' words and violent video images reinforce a negative stereotype, as if it's the exclusive reality in minority communities. The songs and video images cast black men in a negative light and present women as money-grubbing and "easy."

This is part of rap's problem. The rappers casually spit out highly charged epithets. Kids and adults like Imus take the liberal use of bad language as a sign that anything goes. After all the breast-beating, Imus will resume his career and an Imus clone is getting promoted to his former chair at WFAN.

The biggest losers are the people burdened with the images created by the rappers. We have met the enemy and he is us.

Singer enlightened

Grammy-winning rapper Chamillionaire learned the hard way about the destruction created by his racially offensive hip-hop language. He told an Associated Press music writer that while on tour with his last album he discovered young, mostly white audiences lip-synching and rapping the N-word right along with him. Chamillionaire promised that "Ultimately Victory," his album due out next month, would eschew racy lyrics and racial epithets. Chamillionaire's conversion came when he realized that he was teaching the whites in his

audience to use the most offensive racial insult on him.

This is a good time to turn up the heat. Rap sales have plunged by one-third since last year.

As the forum was ending, Paterson Deputy Mayor Dawn Blakely offered a plan of attack: If you become a stockholder in some of the entertainment companies, you can go to stockholder meetings and protest the companies' offensive rap products.

There's also a move afoot to tighten the economic noose by removing public employees' pension funds from investments in the offending entertainment companies' stocks.

The message I took away from the forum is that ordinary folks are the key to turning the tide on hip-hop; they are powerless only if they believe themselves to be.

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