

The Message is in the Music

Circa 1973, as the music industry began to commodify and reconfigure the protest agenda for a youth audience as a product, the impact of a revolutionary message delivered in an LP record became compromised. Yet traces of how the ethos of revolution foregrounded in the sixties and manifested in rock culture remained. Some traces were uncompromised and references to the operations of the Black Panthers' revolutionary band, The Lumpen (1970–1971), exemplify this. Emory Douglas, the Panthers' Minister of Culture, supported the creation of a polemical band with the purpose of spreading their message. The Lumpen delivered the Panthers' revolutionary message by adapting popular funk and soul songs primarily for Black audiences. Song titles included 'Revolution is the Only Solution' and 'Old Pig Nixon'. This strategy underlined the continuing importance of the vernacular of the street. In 1965, a 'cool it' catchphrase 'Burn, baby, burn' was popularised on the Los Angeles Black radio station KGFJ. However, as property burned during the Watts riots in August that year, it was détourned into a sign of solidarity not only among the active looters and fire-bombers, but also among the bystanders and supporting witnesses.¹ Using a popular medium, the activist musicians saw the vernacular assist in surmounting the barriers placed by the language of the apparatus of state control. Importantly, The Lumpen also controlled the distribution of their music. In 1970, James Brown, one of the biggest Black musicians in America at the time, spoke on music that spoke of the time and the boundaries that change yet suggested having these conversations remain within the field of entertainment, he said,

A lot of people have gone out preaching revolution. I would rather stay in the record business right now. I am trying to do some good but you cannot sing people a song and then make a revolutionary speech because it just gets the record buyers confused. I would rather keep one away from the other although I am more part of the revolution that is going on.

At the time Brown had brought out what he called his 'Black Commandments, B.L.A.C.K.'

B. The Black man bullied and scorned for so long.

L. Loneliness for the rights that we never had a chance to exercise.

A. Act now before it is too late.

C. Correction of constitutional rights, which we have never been able to exercise.

¹ Francis Stacey, *Constructed Situations A New History of the Situationist International*. London: Pluto Press 2014, p. 63.

K. Knocking on the door has gotten boring and pathetic. We are coming in.

(*New Spotlight Magazine*, 1970)

Keeping with the Irish thread in this discussion, it is worth mentioning that the above is taken from a profile of James Brown that was printed in the Irish showband/beat magazine, *New Spotlight*, in 1970; ‘Peace is the Message’ was the title of that issue.²

In his book, *Party Music* (2013, pp. 330–321), the author Rickey Vincent remarks that The Lumpen were ‘Revolutionary artists (who) took on an identity that transcended aesthetics as their art reached into the realm of activism’ and points out that authenticity was a ‘significant part of the ethos of black artistic expression’. This concept of an open-sourced Blackness delivered as music was to be a template that was taken up seriously in the eighties by rap musicians and producers. That new generation embraced the concept of sampling the previous generation’s music as an act of reclamation and also to reactivate the context of revolution for themselves.

Over the coming decades, before the advent of online delivery, music groups aligned to countercultural principles either pursued a path of independent distribution or sought to subvert commercial agendas by attempting to deliver anti-establishment messages through corporate channels. Dick Hebdidge has argued that once signifiers are translated into commodities for a wider audience, they become ‘frozen’ and lose impact. However, on occasion, the reach of the signifier defies the regulated structure of the market. In the late eighties, the Los Angeles rap group, Niggers With Attitude (NWA), practised a grittier strategy than The Lumpen and reactivated many of the racial issues concerning power that remained associated with the Black urban experience.³ This time, the spread of the anti-power vernacular instigated by Newton was furiously taken up by these rappers who sought to reignite elements of earlier Panther conversations. The group was also from Compton, LA, which was the very territory originally patrolled by the Panthers. It was significant that their first statement addressed the power of the vernacular by taking propriety of the derogatory word ‘nigger’, which embodied a mindset of slavery and lack of unity.⁴ Previously, in 1969, the Last Poets addressed the oppressive

² In his 1971 album, *Revolution of the Mind*, recorded live in the Apollo, Harlem, New York, for his finale, Brown had the crowd chanting ‘Power to the People!’ the mantra of the Black Panthers. Rickey Vincent *Party Music*, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, p. 122.

³ NWA sold 3 million copies of their debut album on release.

⁴ The word had previously been deployed by other revolutionary artists such as Gill Scott Heron, the LA Group, The Watts Prophets, and the Last Poets but they did not attain the reach of what NWA eventually achieved for wider consciousness in the eighties. The origin of the word’s turn in the sixties is discussed in *On*

condition that allowed the authorities to maintain the mindset of slavery in their proto-rap ‘Niggers are Scared of Revolution’. Two decades later these same conditions invited a more direct response.

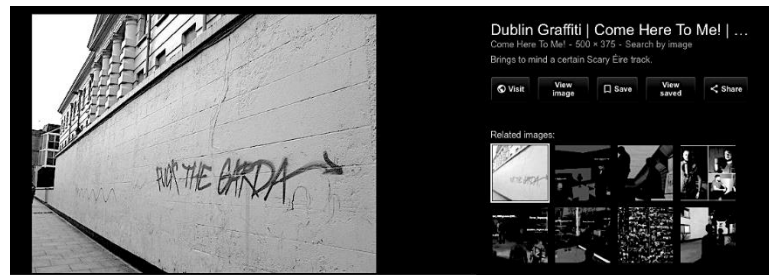


Figure 1. Graffiti in Dublin circa 2015.

Source: McGrath, Fallon and Murray (n.d.)⁵

NWA’s uncompromising 1989 track ‘Fuck Tha Police’ had an incendiary life that extended way beyond the territory that inspired it. Speaking of its time, the lyrics attested to the failure of Newton’s ambitious intention for individual police officers to realise and denounce their oppressive role. Lead rapper Ice Cube’s rap in the song that the police ‘have the authority to kill a minority’ (NWA, 1988) announced to a contemporary audience that there was no change in some situations, particularly in Compton, since the seventies. Things, if anything, were much worse with Cube stating that the Black police now ‘show out for the white cop’ (NWA, 1988). The response to the popularity of the group by the authorities included a complaint by the assistant director of the FBI to Priority Records, the company distributing the LP. The letter ended with the comment that ‘music plays a significant role in society, and I wanted you to be aware of the FBI’s position to this song and its message. I believe my views reflect the opinion of the entire law enforcement community’ (Marsh and Pollack, 1989, p. 33). Previously, Black ‘message’ rap records with lyrics inspired by ghetto life had not attracted this attention or fear. The creators of these early rap messages, some with a background in church or community work or education, and most from New York delivered their commentary as motivators using funk-based disco music as their musical bedrock. This new music drew on the popular styles of the mainstream as heard on the streets, radio, and clubs. By 1988 these were not the components that were needed as essentials for the documentary styled immediacy demanded by NWA’s production.

A Mission: Selected poems and a History of the Last Poets by Abiodun Oyewole and Umar Bin Hassan with Kim Green. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996, p. 45.

⁵ *Come Here To Me! Dublin Life and Culture* [blog]. Available at: <<https://comeheretome.com/>> [accessed 19 April 2019].

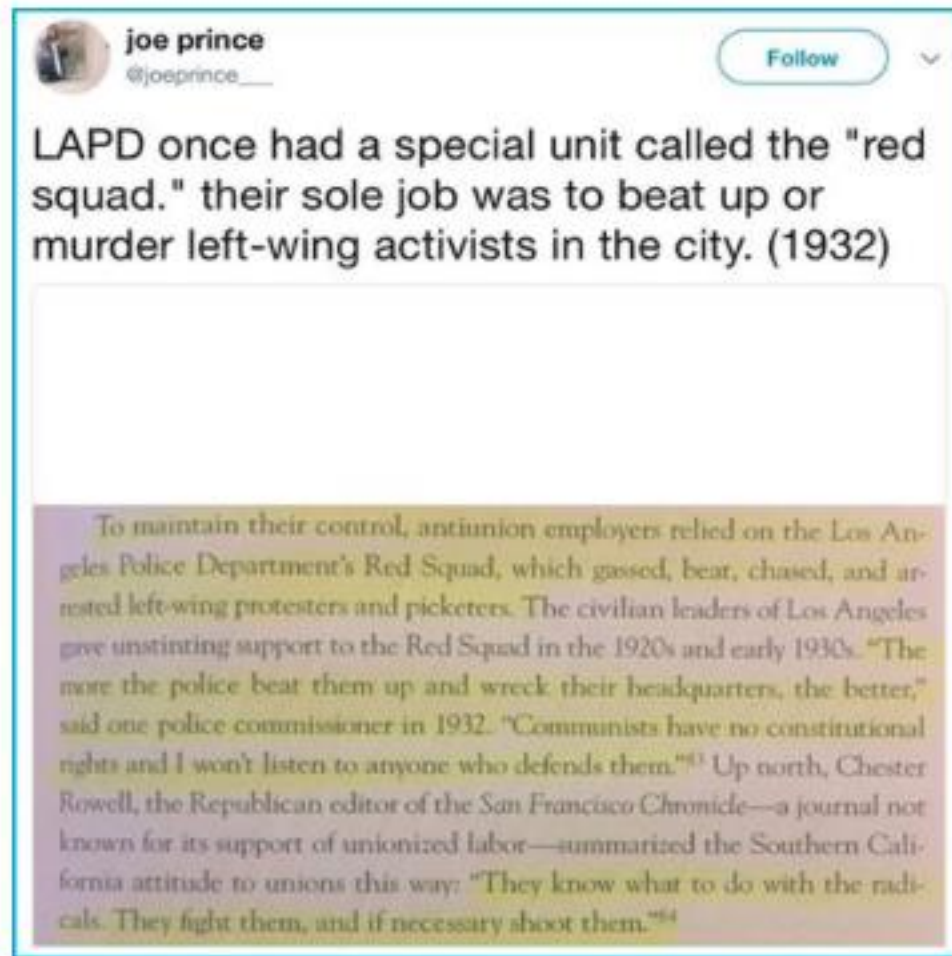


Figure 17. Anon. Excerpt [Accessed 10 October 2017].

Writing in 1991 on the ‘moral panic’ that followed the establishment’s fear of the NWA as influencers, David Toop (1994, p. 181) comments that much of the panic may have ‘stemmed from the realisation that large numbers of teenagers, including vast numbers of whites, were buying a record released on an independent young black label without being hyped into it’. Although the segregated markets that regulated Black product as race records in the 1920s had diminished, caution and censorship remained if outspoken material on record seemed to attract attention outside Black communities. In this instance, it can be said that NWA’s popularity featured as a glitch in the regulation normally maintained for cultural purposes by record companies and their media partners.

On wider distribution, the NWA LP, *Straight Outta Compton*, was one of the first records to receive a parental advisory label affixed to it before sale. From 1985, the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) encouraged record companies to self-censor their acts by labelling

their product with a sticker that said, 'parental advisory advised'. The PMRC had significant influence, and the legacy of their black and white sticker is a constant reminder of the decision to manage the reception and message of Black music.

With a sticker as a mark of censorship now prominent at purchase points, LPs such as *Straight Outta Compton* became simultaneously desired and stigmatised. With this, there is a comparison with the second-hand life of the recorded speeches of Martin Luther King. On occasion, these were officially withdrawn from public libraries and were officially stamped 'withdrawn'. These labels remained when the LP invariably made its way to second-hand stores.⁶ With the imprimatur⁷ of censored and discarded artefacts, these 'discarded' Black artefacts were reclaimed as material for sampling by a new generation of pan-African rappers in the eighties. Producers responded to the texture of King's voice and his seminal 'I Have a Dream' speech was used to bring consciousness to Black records in the late eighties. There were different levels of this engagement. Rap producers' records that sought to reference the conflict of the sixties as an ongoing conversation for Black communities sought out the strident voice of Malcolm X. Recordings of his strident speeches invited edits for concise sound bites that could be repurposed for contemporary ends. In this way, popular culture was infiltrated by a Black militant agenda for an audience that far exceeded what would have been possible in the era of The Lumpen. For example, a punch line from Malcolm X's speech on the establishment's fear of an organised Black agenda, 'It's just like when you have some coffee that's too black and too strong'⁸ was edited by the profile rap group, Public Enemy, to become the well-travelled war cry 'Too Black – Too Strong'.⁹ A seminal example of the genre from 1983 was an edit of various speeches by Malcolm X produced under the umbrella of hip hop. Malcolm X's widow gave permission for the use of recordings of her slain husband's voice on a hip hop record produced by Keith Le Blanc, a White drummer who worked as a session drummer for early hip hop artists in New York. This record, with a striking photograph of Malcolm on its sleeve, was played in Ireland by a minority of Irish hip hop DJs on release. The portrait was also used as a flyer to promote the Dublin dance club, Soul On Ice, in 1987. *Soul On Ice* is the title of a memoir and collection of essays by the Black Panther, Eldridge Cleaver.

⁶ These tainted records could occasionally be found in second-hand markets in LA and alongside speeches by Malcolm X, which were sampled by the likes of NWA.

⁷ There was an authority to what these artefacts represented for conscious producers seeking sounds to convey the protest ethos of the Civil Rights period.

⁸ Malcolm X (1963) 'Message to the Grass Roots' November 1963, Detroit (published in *Malcolm X Speaks*, 1965, chapter 1).

⁹ Public Enemy (1987) *Bring The Noise*. Def Jam Records.

In his essay, 'Black Vernacular Visual Culture and the Poetry of the Future',¹⁰ Paul Gilroy (2005, p. 167) maps what he calls 'musicking'. This refers to the outcome of Black music that conveys coded information and covert messages first within its peer group before branching out to communicate opposition. It does this by putting 'the substance of dissenting and oppositional sentiment on display in complex forms that defiled and demanded interpretation.'¹¹ The sale of post-war Black music worldwide was tied to styles of Blackness and supported by the strong visual icons delivered in the vernacular space of the LP cover.

NWA were acutely aware of the fusion of image and content. The now iconic sleeve of the LP, *Straight Outta Compton*, is a portrait of the group circling the camera taken from below from the perspective of a dying (police?) man. This provocative image was supported by the aggressive music for a package that accelerated calls for it to be censored. As it happened, the group was censored by both Black and White radio as well as the music TV channel, MTV. As a consequence, the LP became a radical product that led to the group being supported by an underground word of mouth phenomenon as controversy followed them.

The journey taken by the LP also made use of the independent recording opportunities offered by cassette culture where difficult-to-attain LPs were taped and passed around on cassette. This was a longstanding strategy to circumvent barriers created by the establishment and media. Also, the act of an audience committed to spreading a music-based message echoed the type of media strategy practised by the Panthers.

We told the truth on this record, so now we're gonna teach the truth. Now we got a bigger audience that buys our records and likes us but don't really understand. We're gonna show them the raw reality of life. When they come out the other end, they gonna say, 'Damn, it's like that? For real?'¹²

By 1988, the controversy prompted debates on censorship and freedom of speech as mainstream America confronted the threat of radical commentary breaking free from ghettos and influencing the White youth of the suburbs. The subtext of the idea that White youth being exposed to the polemics of anti-authority via the Black vernacular remained the danger it always threatened to be. Toop (1994, p. 180) mentions a TV newsreader at the time of the panic

¹⁰ 'No. I do not have the right to be a Negro.' (Gilroy, 2005, p. 167).

¹¹ See Petrine Archer-Straw, David A. Bailey and Richard J. Powell, *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary* [exhibition] (Walsall, UK: New Art Gallery Walsall, 2005).

¹² Steve Hochman (1989) 'N.W.A Cops an Attitude an Attitude' in *Rolling Stone* magazine.

asking his colleagues on air ‘I wonder if they wrote a book about it (the desire to ban an NWA product) would it be banned at the library?’