

Are You Down for the Cause or Because? Appreciating Hip-Hop's Justice Roots

By Edward Vogel, co-creator of "Rhymes and Reasons"

Hip-hop has become one of the biggest cultural phenomena of the last thirty years but it is often misunderstood, especially by people committed to social justice. How can an artform that is often misogynistic, homophobic, and materialistic speak to the same issues that define the radical love of the Gospels? How does hip-hop align with the Catholic Worker Movement? Answer: hip-hop is an attempt to document a history that our society is structured to ignore. It is the story of the poor, the imprisoned, the beaten down, as well as a story of the Beatitudes and the Works of Mercy. Taking the time to appreciate hip-hop will help you cross the border into a deeper understanding of another group of people and will offer a better understanding of what social justice truly is.

I was born into a privileged, middle class, white family in Lansing, Michigan with two parents and a firm grip on upward mobility. I was born into a Catholic family residing in a strong Catholic community where I would be supported and nurtured in my faith tradition from a young age. I attended the local Catholic school where I enjoyed a great education and was introduced to the idea of social justice.

But I had another privilege unconsidered by most: I was born in one of the first generations where hip-hop music and culture preceded me. When I was a kid, hip-hop culture, style, and rap music were everywhere. One of my brothers blasted his rap CDs on his stereo before my father decided that "vulgar" music was not welcome in his home. After that, I didn't listen to much hip-hop, only the songs that crossed over into the pop mainstream from artists like Puff Daddy, Notorious B.I.G., the Beastie Boys, Outkast, and Will Smith.

In high school, that all changed.

I had started listening to Rage Against the Machine when I was only a boy. I loved Rage; they were raw, they were powerful, and they spoke to the same social concerns that my parents and school emphasized only in a different type of language and perspective. They released their last studio album, *Renegades*, which was also a cover album, during my freshman year of high school. My favorite song on the album was "Microphone Fiend", and after reviewing the liner notes, I discovered that a DJ and rapper duo named Eric B. & Rakim had originally recorded the song. I got my hands on the original version and it blew my mind. Eric B & Rakim became a gateway for me into rap music. I couldn't stop listening. I started to search for more. I listened to Public Enemy, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest. All of these artists spoke to me because they discussed social concerns.

My interest in hip-hop, however, largely stopped at anything released after 1994. At that point, the music felt so different that I couldn't understand it. I also could not find meaning in the drugs, violence, and the misogyny. These lyrics that I perceived to be abusive, embellished, and degrading did not agree with how I was raised to respect others and myself. I was fifteen and longing for the hip-hop from the late '80s-early '90s, or the "golden era" of hip-hop.

That same freshman year of high school, my oldest brother, Matt, who had just graduated from college, joined the Catholic Worker Movement and moved into the St. Joseph House in New York

City. This was the first that I had ever heard of the Catholic Worker Movement or Dorothy Day. But I did not give it much more thought at the time because it did not seem pertinent to my life. When I was a sophomore in high school, though, I broke my foot and missed the soccer season. It was a long four months of recovery, as I grew bored and had much more time on my hands. So I took the time to learn more about the Catholic Worker Movement and its radical Christianity. I remember being transfixed by this clear vision of justice and by the unapologetic political nature of the ideas. It began a slow process within me as I began to understand social justice at a deeper level and in the context of a growing visceral awareness of oppression in my everyday experience.

When I graduated from high school, I attended Loyola University Chicago, a Jesuit Catholic University, and during my freshman year, I met one of my best friends, Chris. Chris was a hip-hop fan. He loved Kanye West.

Chris introduced me to the music of a young guy from Chicago named Lupe Fiasco, a devout Muslim from the Westside. I was intrigued. Then Lupe released his first album when I was a junior. It was like the moment that I first heard “Microphone Fiend.” It spoke to me. Lupe’s album *Food and Liquor* spoke of social issues in a language that resonated with my Catholic upbringing and my understanding of the Catholic Worker Movement. Lupe was “it” for me for the next two years. He represented what I wanted to see from people in my generation—a focus on justice that superseded everything else.

While at Loyola, I began to understand that social justice requires more than signing up for days of service, working at a soup kitchen, or even joining a Catholic Worker community. I began to realize that a commitment to justice requires a constant lens on the world: a lens that looks for all forms, both hidden and overt, of oppression. Oppression is more than an event, more than someone going hungry or being abused. Oppression is an attitude that we each carry but often are unaware that we carry because it is part of our normal behaviors. It goes by many names and manifestations: racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, to name a few. These attitudes are so insidious that even though we may consider ourselves to be allies and advocates of the oppressed, in reality, many of our behaviors reinforce oppressive structures because these behaviors and structures seem so normal, common, and harmless. Therefore, social justice must likewise go beyond action and become a state of mind, a lens on the world, a way of being. This is when I began to realize that hip-hop also goes beyond the action of making music. It is a lifestyle born of resistance, it is a perspective and a preferential option for the poor.

It wasn’t until I met Eric, my partner with *Rhymes and Reasons*, that I fully began to appreciate hip-hop for what it is. I had experienced socially conscious hip-hop and enjoyed it, but Eric helped me to understand that, even if a song was not overtly focused on social justice, it was a subtle act of resistance.

One of my favorite moments of Jasson Perez’s *Rhymes and Reasons* interview is when he discusses Outkast and the lyrics to “Return of the ‘G.’” Jasson discusses this idea of not getting caught up in “labels.” His point is that no matter how you identify—as a “gangsta” or as “someone who is down for the cause”—you can still act as an oppressor or as an ally to the oppressed. A commitment to justice is more than just labels, outward appearance, or basic actions. This idea, put so simplistically and eloquently by Andre3000, summarizes the understanding that I came to while in college.

In hip-hop, there exists an authentic understanding of oppression and resistance that constitutes a lifestyle often not chosen but simply required to survive. Hip-hop often isn't pretty; it often describes the world in a non-absolute morality, and it never says that the privileged are the answer to fixing oppression. It's not the music of Pete Seeger or Bruce Springsteen, not that there is anything wrong with those artists, but hip-hop addresses inequities in a different manner than any other music. Hip-hop discusses social issues not just because of a moral obligation but due to a necessity to live.

Hip-hop started to fascinate me even more once I began to recognize that, not only was the music rooted in social justice, but it resonated with the themes of Catholic Social Teaching. Common in the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching is a call to find Jesus in every person. This manifests itself in many different ways: whether it is the option for the poor and vulnerable, solidarity across borders, boundaries, and barriers, or the dignity and the right to work for all. What makes hip-hop so profound is that, without Jesus being necessarily at the core, hip-hop speaks to these same issues.

Being born out of resistance, it is in many ways an act of solidarity in and of itself—the music, an oral history detailing why and how people struggle to survive in a society that marginalizes them. It is an attempt to document a history that our society is structured to ignore. It is the story of the poor, the imprisoned, the beaten down, as well as a story of the Beatitudes and the Works of Mercy. This is part of the mission of *Rhymes and Reasons*, to discover the stories of hip-hop that extend past the music and how regular people share the same stories. HB Sol, in his interview, clearly articulates the solidarity of hip-hop when he discusses Nas' ability in "NY State of Mind" to communicate the exact struggles that were occurring simultaneously all across the country in different cities with his lyrics. Shannon Matesky discusses hip-hop's ties to human rights when she discusses Eve's "Love is Blind" in the context of her own rape: how hip-hop helped her not to be ashamed of being a survivor of sexual violence in a society that wants to treat her like she is at fault.

I know what you're thinking: What about all the lyrics degrading women, pushing materialism, and glamorizing drugs? That's real. I caution you, though, because to dismiss hip-hop for these lyrics would be like dismissing the transformative and radical love of the Gospel message because the Old Testament contains many passages justifying sexism and homophobia. True, these oppressive messages are prevalent and have become only more common with the commercialization of hip-hop. The unlikely event that we would ever see a group like X-Clan on MTV again (look'em up) doesn't mean that hip-hop, as a whole, is superficial. While not every song is as overtly socially conscious and politically challenging as Lupe Fiasco's "American Terrorist", real issues are being discussed by artists like Kendrick Lamar, Big K.R.I.T., and J. Cole—issues that get to the heart of a lifestyle committed to justice.

Hip-hop is a reflection of U.S. culture. It contains violence, misogyny, and homophobia precisely because U.S. culture contains these behaviors and values. These lyrics don't need to be embraced and should not be glamorized. But to deny the validity, power, and importance of hip-hop simply because of these lyrics is to ignore the realities of the U.S. that many with privilege can choose to ignore whenever it is convenient and comfortable. To dismiss this art altogether would be to dismiss the experience of a whole group of our brothers and sisters.

An intentional effort at understanding hip-hop will allow for the witness of the beauty of this art and see how its purpose is often one in the same as Christian teachings on social justice. Coming to appreciate another culture is essential for constructive social justice work. But one word of caution:

if hip-hop isn't your culture, appreciate it, but don't appropriate it. As I wrote earlier, hip-hop is not looking for the privileged as a savior for the ills discussed in hip-hop. Taking the time to understand and appreciate hip-hop is not an invitation to join the culture. It is an invitation to discover another strand of activism that has more in common with Christian social teaching than many believe. In many ways, *Rhymes and Reasons* attempts to bridge the barriers for those just learning about hip-hop, as well as being a tool for those who are "hip-hop" and allow them to share their stories with each other. *Rhymes and Reasons* is simply a storytelling platform for people to recognize the common humanity in each other. Taking the time to appreciate hip-hop will help you cross the border into a deeper understanding of another group of people and will offer a better understanding of what social justice truly is.

Edward Vogel is the co-creator of "Rhymes and Reasons," a series of interviews with hip-hop heads who discuss their lives in the context of the songs that matter to them. He resides in Chicago and currently is a member of the Su Casa Catholic Worker community.