

ELEMENTS

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Where Politics and Hip Hop Merge: The National hip Hop Political Convention

Matt Birkhold, *Elements* Coeditor

Mainstream members of the Republican and Democratic parties have never cared much about the needs of young nonwhite people from urban areas or the needs of young people in general. Over the last fifty years, this problem has increased in severity because the needs of these groups have changed while the understandings politician's have of them have not. Since the legal desegregation of schools in 1954 and the legalization of abortion in 1973, the American political reality has been in a state of change that has had both positive and negative consequences for all Americans. While older politicians fail to understand the way these changes have impacted young people and people of color, the impact of these changes are understood very well by members of the hip hop generation.

Back in the Days

Over the last fifty years legal racial discrimination was outlawed, abortion made legal, and the numbers of people of color in the media and in corporations increased. As a result, many people now assume that racism and sexism are on their way out of American political and social life. However, that assumption denies the fact that during these same years the American education system became less effective, college became less attainable, and inner cities were torn apart by a drug called crack. Simultaneously, the US underwent a profound process of deindustrialization that produced an unemployment rate for people of color that was (and still is) at least two—six times higher than the unemployment rate for whites. When taken together, the introduction of crack, deindustrialization, and poor access to education became a set of triple evils that led to the imprisonment of giant proportions of both black and brown men and women in numbers far greater than their percentage of the population. In addition to wide scale imprisonment, these triple evils also created an alarmingly high rate of murder in black and brown communities and an increase in drug addiction.

Additionally, over the last fifty years, health care has become more expensive and less effective, the right of women to have an abortion has been under constant attack, the representation of nonwhites in the media has begun to consist largely of racist caricatures, women have experienced unprecedented sexism both in public and in the media, and the United States has waged an unjust war with several countries in the Middle East producing a global death rate amongst nonwhites that is higher than the number of white lives lost to war. **See Politics, page 2**

Brother Ali and His Underground Appeal

Jessica LaShawn, *Elements* Coeditor

I recently witnessed hip hop history at a concert in Chicago featuring the NHHPC's own Mr. Toki Wright and Brother Ali. The Chicago stop on their national tour devoted to the underground's prime musical geniuses united youth at the famous Abbey Pub where Brother Ali stood out as the people's choice. One young lady traveled from as far away as from Kansas City to see him. Her face lit up when she saw Ali and asked him to sign her shoe, a popular demand Ali says is "disgusting," but gladly does for his people. He is bombarded by youth of different backgrounds with one thing in common, they all relate to his music, his passion, and the message.

According to Ali, "My music is just an expression of my life, the things I go through and how I plan on dealing. I've been through a lot, I'm an adult, I have a family, and I have to strive to support them. What I do is not about hip-hop, it's about embracing one of the things I love to do. I take this seriously." When asked why he chose to pursue a career in hip hop he assured me that he "didn't choose hip hop. I was just doing what I love. My music allows **See Ali, page 2**



"I lost a lot of sponsorship after that but I had to get the message out there," said Brother Ali of the video, "Uncle Sam."

Politics from p. 1 While the situation described above may be a new political reality to the United States, it is anything but new to the hip hop generation. Poor health care, poor education, high unemployment, high murder rates, wide scale imprisonment of nonwhites, covert racism and overt sexism are the elements which make up the only reality the hip hop generation has ever known. Unfortunately, older, established American politicians fail to understand this political reality because, unlike the hip hop generation, they do not live it. Hip hop was born from this political reality and the founding of the National Hip Hop Political Convention is an attempt to change this political reality and create a new one.

The World is Ours

Founded in 2004 as a result of efforts put forth by hip hop generation activists, the first of a biannual series of conventions called the National Hip Hop Political Convention occurred in Newark, New Jersey. Drawing over 6,000 people, the convention ended with the creation of a five-point National Hip Hop Political Agenda and an organization of the same name. Following the 2006 convention in Chicago, the agenda was expanded to include the seven following items:

1. Education Reform, 2. Economic Justice, 3. Criminal Justice Reform, 4. Health and Wellness, 5. Gender Equality, and 7. Media Justice

In an attempt to realize the National Hip Hop Political Agenda, the National Hip Hop Political Convention has created a steering committee at the national level that seeks to give a political voice to the hip hop generation. At the local level, the convention consists of Local Organizing Committees (LOCs) in Boston, New York, Newark, NJ, Philadelphia, the Triad cities of N.C., Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Omaha, Las Vegas, Phoenix, the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

What They Do

LOCs have participated in a wide array of activities including, but not limited to, rebuilding New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, screening and promoting the film *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, registering voters in numerous cities, protesting police brutality, and creating and conducting political education campaigns at the community level.

As a whole, the National Hip Hop Political Convention works to improve health and wellness, improve the quality of education, and create economic opportunities in communities that have been denied the protection of these basic human rights. The Convention teams with organizers, activists, elected officials, and concerned citizens to collectively advocate progressive initiatives for social change by increasing civic education, civic engagement, and direct action in partnership with organizations that support the National Hip Hop Political Agenda. Creating a path to better reach these goals is the aim of the 3rd biannual National Hip Hop Political Convention in Las Vegas in August 2008.

Ali from page 1 me to bring others into my world and show them my perspective. I'm albino, legally blind, and I have gone through a lot. I have a song called "Forest Whitiker," which talks about my quest to love and identify with myself. People can relate because everybody goes through that period in time when they have to evaluate themselves and see how they view themselves and think about the angle in which another person is coming from when they try to bring you down." In case Ms Kansas City hadn't clearly convinced me of Ali's importance to his fans, the amount of times our conversation was interrupted by people showing their love and appreciation for Brother Ali's craft left no doubt about his importance. They fought tears, called friends on their cell phones, asked for autographs and pictures, shook hands, hugged, and bonded. For Ali, its part of the job, "I gotta take time out for my people. My music means something to them just like it means something to me."

I couldn't help but ask what the biggest challenges his career had faced thus far, and he described the backlash that surfaced after the debut of his video "Uncle Sam." "I lost a lot of sponsorship after that but I had to get the message out there. We went down to the capitol without any permits and just did what we had to do. It's a powerful song and it was worth the drama." I asked why incorporating political issues, ideas, and agendas into his music were important and he took a moment and said "politics is in every aspect of our lives. We are governed in some kind of way, be it by our religions, the elected official, school authorities and whomever else. I don't address issues in a way where I am trying to enforce a certain way of thinking but I do acknowledge the issue, why I think it is wrong and include a possible solution. Its up to the listener to agree or disagree, in the end as long as the problem is exposed and I've released some energy the mission is complete." Finally I request that he tell me what makes underground different from mainstream hip hop and he states, "it's a free medium. I'm blessed because after so long I was approached by major labels requesting distribution deals. But I still have that rawness about my material. I talk about real life and not that fake stuff that seems to be over glorified. That's what hip hop is and the underground accepts the founders and/or legends of this lifestyle. We recognize them and embrace them. You don't have to



NHHPC members at the US Social Forum

