

Leland, J. (1992, June 29). [Rap and Race](#). Newsweek, pp. 46-52.

OVERVIEW

Although it seemed for a time that racial tensions in the United States had ebbed, the message of popular rap and hip-hop music today is one of increased tension and frustration. According to the author, color has replaced the generation gap as the driving force behind pop music—more specifically, rap music. Racial tension remains a great concern in America today and, as rap music vies to serve as the voice of the black community, all Americans should note what rappers are saying.

Racism and the black rapper's feelings on the subject are the foci of this article, written specifically in the context of the adolescent world. Included in the text are quotes from several rap artists expressing their views on race. Leland includes many lyrics highlighting the anger and tension of rap music.

Leland gives particular attention to rapper [Sister Souljah](#) (Lisa Williamson). Quoting a Washington Post interview, Williamson says, "If black people kill black people every day, why not take a week and kill white people?"

Leland also mentions the lyrics from a song titled "Cop Killer" by rapper [Ice-T](#): "I'm 'bout to bust some shots off/I'm 'bout to dust some cops off..."

This article, written in the wake of the Los Angeles riots, underlines the volatile situation still existing between blacks and whites throughout the country.

As part of his research, Leland interviewed twelve New York City area teenagers—black and white, male and female. Selected responses to a variety of racially related questions are included in the article to bring it a fresh and relevant perspective.

One of Leland's theories is that today's rap explosion is largely a latter-day version of the rock 'n roll explosion of the 1950s and 1960s. Both trends sprang from the adolescents' search for self-definition and expression. This idea is endorsed by Deonna, one of the teenage interviewees:

'Rap is scaring people now. But if you remember back to the 60s and 70s, when everybody became hippies and had their own dress and

music, people got scared. It was just that kids wanted their own identity. They wanted to be noticed, they wanted to be understood. All of this [now] is just people crying out for help.'

One last theme of the article is that rap is moving toward a purity based on the existence of the "authentic Black experience." While artists such as Prince and Michael Jackson have not strongly identified themselves with blacks, today's rap artists attempt to distance themselves from other forms of pop art. Leland cited [Public Enemy](#)'s production supervisor as saying, " 'There's definitely a religion that has developed out of this.' "

The religion he speaks of is the religion of racial authenticity. This is evidenced by the reaction of some blacks to the music and person of Vanilla Ice. In "[Bring the Noise](#)", Havelock Nelson and Michael Gonzales say of [Vanilla Ice](#):

'While white appropriation of hip-hop is no longer a novelty, Vanilla Ice comes off to aficionados of the music as an especially calculating and barefaced counterfeit. His poser attitude grates even more because it's successful. He didn't go through the channels, gaining street acceptance before crossing over, and like Paul Whiteman and Elvis before him, he's riding the coattails of a black art form all the way to pop culture heaven.'

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Should artists be free to communicate any and all feelings through their music? Are there any topics or opinions that should be censored or prohibited? Do and should artists bear any responsibility for how listeners respond to their music? Explain.
- Are rap and hip-hop realistic expressions of the black situation? How could a non-black find out?
- Does the communication of racial tension through rap help solve the situation? Does it make the situation worse? Explain.
- In what ways can those working with adolescents use rap music to meet kids' needs?

IMPLICATIONS

- Popular music, including rap, reflects the culture from which it was

born. Consequently, America needs to recognize the tremendous hurt and anger felt by the blacks across the country.

- As youth workers seek to understand youth culture, it is important to remain open to the different ways in which kids express themselves. Refrain from harsh judgments on those expressions, especially the style of their music.
- Although understanding is a good start, parents and youth workers need to seek constructive ways to meet the needs of adolescents.

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