Rapanese American: The Art, Aesthetics & Visibility

by Colin Ehara

To this day, I maintain a very specific and vivid memory of walking down Telegraph Avenue after a morning service at the Berkeley Buddhist Temple. It was the turn of the century and millennium and I had just left Amoeba Records having purchased Blackalicious' latest album, NIA. Due to their tireless work ethic, Blackalicious' producer, Chief X-Cel and Emcee, Gift of Gab had caused much commotion in recent years and I, like many others in the Bay Area at the time, was very excited for this release. After struggling with the shrink-wrapped packaging for enough time to border on furiousness, I managed to open the CD and popped it into my Sony Discman. The outdated model I owned unfortunately didn't have "shock-protection," so I had to do a kind of balancing act as I played the album for the first time on my way to the BART station. As chance or fate would have it, just as my eyes met the credits and liner notes of the third track, the song came on. And as I read the lines "featuring Lyrics Born," "produced by Lyrics Born," and "lyrics by T. Shimura," the following words entered my ears:

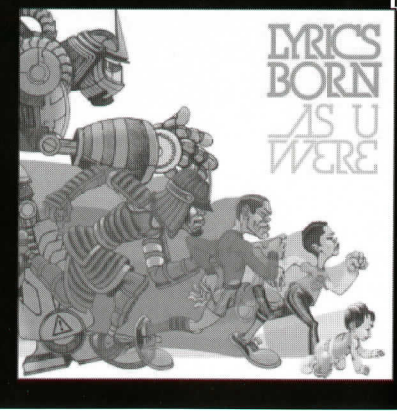
I'll be the first ever Asian astronaut, blastin' off, castin' off the ties that bind like a smashed guitar...

It immediately dawned on me that Lyrics Born was not only Asian, but Japanese and that he was not only producing, but also emceeing on the record of a more-than-well-respected Hip-Hop crew (whose nomenclature was Blackalicious). With the assistance of Chief X-Cel and Gift of Gab, Tom "Lyrics Born" Shimura had managed (in a single line) to use Hip-Hop as a means of displaying ethnic and racial pride, whilst combating an idea that he was a perpetual foreigner to America at the same time. My adolescent mind was blown away.

During the relatively short life of what has come to be known as Hip-Hop, a number of Japanese Americans have found acceptance and success in a culture and industry that to most "common sense" perceptions, is synonymous with Black manhood and masculinity. In an art form born as a response to exploitation, poverty and institutional racism, artists like Lyrics Born, Equipto, Beatrock Record's Fatgums, Estria Miyashiro, Dan the Automator, Rhythm X, and Linkin Park's Mike Shinoda have brilliantly walked the fine (explicit and implicit) lines relating to authenticity and what is deemed "real" in these spaces. "Frontin'," or projecting an image deemed to be inauthentic—whether actual or perceived—can often times be a death sentence for a Hip-Hopper's career. Whether it's Dan "The Automator" Nakamura creating spacey soundscapes in the studio, or Equipto twisting up Philly Titans on-stage in San Francisco, Hip-Hop artists of *Nikkei* heritage who have received notoriety from the larger Hip-Hop community have had to be undeniably courageous, creative and intelligent.

Challenging the assumptions of those who solely associate Hip-Hop with ties to African American, hyper-masculine and poor or working-class identity; and solely associate Japanese/Asian American identity with being perpetually foreign, emasculated and of middle-class or wealthy backgrounds; all while being mindful of Black cultural ownership, is no easy task. It is this writer's biased opinion and subjective point of view that *Nikkei* Hip-Hoppers have gained certain degrees of acceptance due to ascertaining the co-sign of individual or multiple Hip-Hopper allies of Black/African heritage. Whether Blackalicious, Prince Paul, Del the Funkee Homosapien, Andre Nickatina, E-40 or even Jay-Z, I'd argue that the credibility gained from the support of big names in mainstream, obscure or underground Hip-Hop communities has played a profound role in the success of many *Nikkei* Hip-Hoppers. I'd also argue that in these relationships, both parties chose to take small to enormous social risks while building these bonds of musical solidarity and deserve (allow me step out of my journalistic/academic voice for a moment) hella f----in' props.

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of the Nikkei in Hip-Hop Culture

Much like the launching pad that Dr. Dre produced for Eminem, the authenticity required to propel any non-Black Hip-Hop artist into relative or absolute success, must also be hard-fought and earned through perspiration. However, a stark difference may be drawn between an Eminem and the fore mentioned *Nikkei* artists, due to the fact that the highest consumer of Hip-Hop/Rap albums are white, middle-class, suburban males (look it up!). While undeniably talented, a white Hip-Hopper like Eminem appeals to



Lyrics Born

an American majority who find relation to him and his music, thus making him extremely marketable. The winner of 13 Grammy Awards, Eminem has even stated himself, "If was Black, I would'a sold half..." While walking the tightrope of proving their poor or working class credentials, ethnic/racial pride, musical ability and/or American authenticity, Japanese and many other Asian American Hip-Hoppers have found themselves left in the shadows with regards to the types of financial success many of their white counterparts have been privy to in the Hip-Hop industry.

The otherization of Japanese and Asian peoples in America has been well documented, but is more often than not lost to historical amnesia. As xenophobia currently targets and runs rampant in South Asian, Middle Eastern/Arab and Muslim communities, it wasn't long ago that my grandparents and great grandparents were subjected to mass incarceration in American concentration camps. The result of the psychological (and not often talked about physical) violence incurred during this time and others, has had a ripple effect in *Nikkei* communities whose families immigrated to the U.S. prior to WWII. While there are important contrasts to note between Asian bodies who immigrated to the United States before and after 1965 (look it up!), post-colonial stress disorder and the balancing act of maintaining ancestral culture, whilst assimilating into white and/or Black American culture, has created an identity spectrum that yearns to be expressed and freed from suppression. Whether shining with their hands, mouths, spray paint cans or bodies, *Nikkei* Hip-Hoppers have and will continue to creatively, imperfectly and courageously penetrate the shadows. ✺

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