

Farrakhan and the Beefs of Rap

By Salim Muwakkil

Television viewers could be forgiven for rubbing their eyes in dismay when they happened upon a conversation between Minister Louis Farrakhan and rap star Jeffrey "Ja Rule" Atkins on November 3. Right there, on BET's most popular youth show "106 And Park" (and later broadcast on MTV), a septuagenarian leader of an ascetic religious group was breaking proverbial bread with a popular rapper whose favorite word seems to be "murder."

The pairing was not as bizarre as it seemed. Nation of Islam leader Farrakhan and hip-hop go way back. The minister believes that hip-hop artists have a profound impact on African-American life and culture. The respect is mutual; Farrakhan's voice has been popping up on rap records since the genre's earliest years and rappers ranging the spectrum (from "conscious" to "gangsta") often speak his praises on record and off.

Growing concerns of runaway violence being fueled by feuding hip-hop artists prompted the minister's prime-time appearance. In early October, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons asked Farrakhan to help mediate a simmering and increasingly dangerous "beef" between Atkins and Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson. He asked if the effort could be recorded to amplify its national impact and Farrakhan agreed.

A spirit of aggressive competition has been integral to hip-hop music from its inception. Historians of the genre note that the rap music, break dancing and graffiti "tagging" that comprised hip-hop's formative elements were created in part to sublimate the violence plaguing the neighborhoods that gave it birth. Some of the earliest rap hits featured so-called battle rhymes. The spirited rivalries in the 1980s of KRS-ONE vs. MC Shan, LL Cool J vs. Kool Moe Dee, or U.T.F.O. vs. Roxanne Shante, kept fans glued to their radios to catch the latest "dis" records. But rap's critics and fans both fear that the battle rhymes and beefs have gotten out of hand. Hip-hop (now embodied primarily by rap music) no longer seems concerned with sublimation.

As Exhibit A in the case against these dissing contests, commentators often

point to the still-unsolved murders of Tupac Shakur on September 7, 1996, and Christopher "Biggie Smalls" Wallace on March 9, 1997. The two rap icons' transformation from friends to bitter rivals triggered an East Coast-West Coast feud that fueled deadly animosities in communities already crippled by excessive violence. That experience made it clear to observers that rap beefs sometimes have



deadly consequences beyond the recording studio.

In 1997, Farrakhan gathered a group of hip-hop artists and activists in Chicago to call a truce in the destructive beef that likely took the lives of Wallace, Shakur and countless others. He said at the time that hip-hop often got a bad rap for reflecting what society would prefer to hide, but that artists also had a responsibility to be balanced in their portrayals.

Farrakhan's recognition of hip-hop's cultural validity was unique among old school black leaders, most of whom dismissed the genre as a faddish and vulgar aberration. Many analysts blame those clashing verdicts about the music's value for a growing generational divide within black America.

At a hip-hop summit two years ago in New York City, Farrakhan urged performers and record executives to be more responsible for the effect of their words. He said hip-hop artists were black America's new leadership. "One rap song from you is worth more than 1,000 of my speeches," he told the crowd. "Will you accept your responsibility as a leader?"

Farrakhan was called back into the fray by fears that the Ja Rule/50 Cent

clash could become deadly or trigger wider feuds. Atkins agreed to meet Farrakhan first and, according to a Nation of Islam spokeswoman, Jackson also has agreed.

Atkins complained to Farrakhan about intense public pressure to keep his beef with Jackson hot. "The public makes it so that we have to keep assaulting each other," Atkins said. He said wanted to write other kinds of lyrics but the "public started to give me ridicule."

Farrakhan urged Atkins to lead rather than follow the public and teach them that there's more to life than beef. He also condemned the record companies for encouraging conflicts between artists. His most salient point, however, was that enemy forces are closely watching hip-hop culture.

"A war is about to come down on the rap community," Farrakhan said during the nationally televised conversation. "When you and 50 throw down, it goes all the way down into the streets," he added.

"The media takes the beef between you and 50 and they play it, they jam it, they keep it going," Farrakhan told Atkins. "Why would they keep something going

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that could produce bloodshed? There is a bigger plot here, Ja, and this is what I want you and 50 and our hip-hop brothers and sisters to see."

This line of argument is a familiar one for Farrakhan, who has long warned that black youth are being demonized by popular culture in order to weaken the black community. He contends the demonization process that has filled U.S. jails and prisons with nearly a million black people is being aided by hip-hop's gangsta posturing. Many viewers were astounded to see this argument being pushed in prime time.

Hip-hop has produced some odd juxtapositions, but none beats Farrakhan on MTV. ■

Take Bush Home, Country Roads

By Craig Aaron

With its pundits and pollsters, bloggers and blowhards, Washington might be the worst place from which to gauge the political mood of the country. So when I need a political reality check, I head for West Virginia.

Mr. and Mrs. J—my grandparents—live in a small town near the Ohio River, a God-fearing, flag-waving, camouflage-wearing kind of place. Mr. and Mrs. J grew up poor, but now they're retired and comfortable. They've got a satellite dish and an RV with walls that expand. They still cook the green beans with bacon (especially tasty for a kid raised Jewish—they're my stepmom's folks).

There's never been a confederate flag in the back of their pickup, but let's just say we don't necessarily share the same views of guns, gay marriage or the Great Society.

So imagine my surprise when I was greeted at the door on Thanksgiving not with a hug or a drumstick, but a diatribe. Mrs. J handed me George W. Bush's "résumé"—a four-page laundry list of the president's deceptions and dubious achievements that circulated recently in cyberspace. (Sample line: "I have removed more freedoms and civil liberties for Americans than any other president in U.S. history.") Though not the first time I'd seen it, this was last place I'd expect to find it.

Then Mr. J spoke in hushed tones about how "dangerous" the president had become. Theirs weren't the voices of the "angry left"—with their giant puppets, hemp jackets and crazy socialist visions. A copy of *Field and Stream* sits on their coffee table. These two watch "Touched by an Angel." They have *quilts*. If they've decided to back anybody but Bush in 2004, it's a good sign.

Bush won West Virginia in 2000 even though the state is home to twice as many registered Democrats as Republicans. The Dems took West Virginia for granted—and when the race got close, the GOP tarred Gore as a tree-hugger who was going to take away their guns. Neither of my grandparents voted for Bush last time (hell, they've never voted Republican). But they do share similar views and values with many of their neighbors who did.

Karl Rove should be concerned. West Virginia didn't prosper that much during the Clinton boom, but it is definitely feeling the brunt of the Bush bust. With neither the factory jobs nor the National Guard units sent abroad coming back anytime soon, the president is vulnerable.

In my Thanksgiving dinner straw poll, no individual Democratic contender had made much of an impression. But our



conversation confirmed that if they hope to take back West Virginia and the White House, the Democrats need a nominee who can appeal to the angry left and the exasperated middle. Pass the mashed potatoes. Hello, Howard Dean.

That's not just the tryptophan talking. Some Republicans are saying the same thing. In a convincing strategy memo titled "Why Dean Can Win," Oregon-based political consultants Hans Kaiser and Bob Moore warn their GOP colleagues not to underestimate the Vermont governor: "We are whistling past the graveyard if we think Howard Dean will be a pushover."

Kaiser and Moore recognize that Dean projects an authenticity that other high-profile Democrats—including Al Gore and Hillary Clinton—all lack. "The difference between Howard Dean and the rest of the Democrat candidates is that Dean comes across as a true believer to the base, but he will not appear threatening to folks in the middle," they wrote in September. "More than any other candidate in the field, he will be able to present himself as one who cares about people (doctor), who balances budgets (gover-

nor), and who appears well grounded while looking presidential."

Their back-of-the-envelope electoral calculations suggest Dean would be a contender. They reason he should be able to take the 13 traditionally Democratic states and the District of Columbia where Gore won handily in 2000—including New York, New Jersey, Illinois and California. That would give Dean a base of 183 electoral votes. Kaiser and Moore predict Bush will easily recapture 24 states in the South and West, representing 206 electoral votes.

That leaves 13 states—and 149 electoral votes—up for grabs. Kaiser and Moore consider nine of those states—including Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin—to be "Democratic-leaning." The other four—Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire and Ohio—favor Bush. Based on these figures, Kaiser and Moore show that Dean could rack up 270 electoral votes even without winning Florida. To do so, he would have to win every state Gore did in 2000 plus two others: Nevada and West Virginia.

At the very least, this scenario raises serious doubts about the dire predictions of

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a McGovern- or Mondale-scale landslide if Dean secures the Democratic nod. Rove is concerned enough about West Virginia that Bush already has visited the state a record five times during his presidency. He spent Fourth of July 2002 just a few miles down the road from Mr. and Mrs. J. You can bet some of that \$200 million war chest Bush is amassing will be spent inundating the state with TV ads.

Dean can't expect much help from the bumbling Democratic establishment or the spineless Senate leadership. Still, as I reach for one last spoonful of Cool-Whip, I can't help smiling at the idea of Jessica Lynch's home state tipping the race.

Pie-in-the-sky dreams? Tastes more like a just dessert. ■