

# John Hutnyk

## THE DIALECTICS OF EUROPEAN HIP-HOP

### Fun^da^mental and the deathening silence

*This article takes into account debates about the provenance of hip-hop in Europe, examines instances of the band Fun^da^mental's creative engagement with, and destabilisation of, music genres, and takes a broadly culture critique perspective as a guide to rethinking hip-hop journalism. Music and ethnicity are core parameters for discussion, and the idea that musical cultures are variously authentic, possessive or coherent is questioned. The war of terror is the wider context.*

The politics of Fun^da^mental is the politics of hip-hop, crossed with a punk Islam that morphs increasingly into interventions around race and representation, the war of 'terror', and a radical version of human rights activism. This paper charts an intertwined story about the journalistic reportage that surrounds the band and the record company from which they come, and the role of commentary and critique of the cultural politics, in a National register, that is their chosen milieu. In Britain, should it surprise us, the lyrical-rhythmic production of this Nation Records' outfit has led to a terse relationship with the mainstream. Much of the music industry press and the critical comment that has been addressed to the band, and to their left-oriented takes on racism, imperialism, women and war, has betrayed itself as inadequate through distortion, condemnation and hostility.<sup>1</sup> It is by now commonplace that hip-hop often suffers a bad press; but when it comes in the guise of Islam-oriented South Asians from the North of England, mixed up with a militant New York sensibility and an intolerance of intolerance that takes on world historical political issues, this is exacerbated. I want to argue that a new angle on Fun^da^mental might be due, though it is not for me to say that the language of the music press or academic convention is always wrong and to be rejected. It is rather that I favour the possibility of additional, even complementary, reorientations in an experimental set that hopes to open ears and minds. Therefore, as the spotlight is moved to a different part of the stage, it might be plausible to look more carefully at the concepts and code words involved. Thus, cue the master of anti-colonial ceremonial, Aki Nawaz, aka Propa Gandhi. The 'fun' and the 'mental' in Fun^da^mentalism is unleashed with a cascading mantra, 'There shall be love, there shall be resistance, there shall be expression, there shall be defence, there shall be peace, or ... there shall be war'.

Conventional discussions of hip-hop in Europe begin with ritual acknowledgement of the derivation of the form from the USA, soon followed by equally ritual insistence that local versions of hip-hop have their own character and autonomy. Without minimizing or forgetting variations in the regional reach of the music, I am tempted to argue that insistence on the similarity and difference of European

hip-hop(s) is little more than a two-step cultural cringe, masquerading as a boundary demarcation, but in all cases subject to forces of complicity, co-option, commercialisation and enclosure. If hip-hop in Europe is marked by the same issues of articulation and institutionalization that afflict US variants, it may be that a more interesting analysis would address something other than provenance or autonomy, and not repeat the formulaic recitations of the music press and cultural industrial complex.

Global hip-hop is of course institutionalised. It is a part of the music industry as *industry*. Here it is useful to remember Adorno's instance that we examine the mass production process of the cultural, and the routinisation engraved into the grooves of records that are played repeatedly,<sup>2</sup> and which are now played all over the place. An industry grafted onto a cultural form that activates a vast apparatus. Systematically integrating creativity, performance, distribution, sales; image, fashion, consumption and design; record stores, nightclubs, fashion shoots and parties; journalists, A&R, style magazines and sweatshirts; spray cans and Raybans, turntables and tablas; junglist-reggae feedback loops of extravagance and power; mad sonic digital 'fx', old school, 'nu skool' and codes from back in the day ... even the language of hip-hop conforms minds to its ways. Yet as an industry, hip-hop commands and demands a range of responses and potentials to rival other contemporary media forms.

This industry has reach. 'Hip-hop ... has become a vehicle for global youth' says one commentator,<sup>3</sup> just as he narrates the routine of a move from the 'adoption to an adaptation of US musical forms and idioms'.<sup>4</sup> This historical and progressivist model does acknowledge that there is now a universal hip-hop language, and that attention is due to its forms outside the USA. However, by insisting on this attention, I suggest a diminutive concession is made to pride of place in a way that betrays the origins and the sentiment of hip-hop as it is made and lived by practitioners, rather than as documented by music press commentators and academics.

A vast culture industry, that much is true, we all know hip-hop comes with its own parallel commentaries and a reach that goes beyond the expectations of the 'under-assistant west-coast promo-man'. Within the apparatus of this essay, I want to examine the role of commentary and critique in a political light. Discussions of hip-hop in Britain continually address the diversity, reach and extension of the cultures of hip-hop. This is why Fun^da^mental are worth considering here. They exemplify the scene's eclectic mix. Should we first talk about the music, or the make-up of the band? Fun^da^mental hail from the Nation Records label and album to album produce a repertoire of music that have drawn an unprecedented wide range of comment and comparison. They have been characterised as among the first UK rap acts. They are known popularisers of the devotional Sufi music form Qawaali. They can produce lyrical Bollywood-hip-hop crossover like *Sister India* (1993); or mad loud metal distortion lyric chaos like *GodDevil* (1996). They effect a hardcore punk aesthetic (impresario Aki Nawaz was formerly a drummer in the Southern Death Cult); and with a diminutive inflection, they have been marked as the Asian Public Enemy.<sup>5</sup> The 'Global Jukebox' night that was a feature of turn of the millennium London dance scene was a Nation initiative, and the label, which Nawaz co-owns, has consistently worked in an international register. Acts as diverse as Prophets of Da City from South Africa, Aziz Mian from Pakistan, Asian Dub Foundation<sup>6</sup> from the East End as well as

Transglobal Underground and Loop Guru (from some other planetary domain) have been brought together in debate and exchange. Unlike conventional world music marketeering, however, Nation, and Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental have a political project that underwrites their involvement.

Ted Swedenburg has noted that ‘among the manifold responses of European Muslims to Islamophobia has been hip-hop activism’.<sup>7</sup> This is also important in terms of the specificity of hip-hop in the UK. If we want to chart this specificity, including its variant idioms and associated forms (jungle, trip-hop, and grime) we might begin by noting how it is marked variously by nation, race and class. This is relevant not only in terms of practitioners and audiences, but also in relation to wider public characterisations of hip-hop as street music or club music – somehow dangerous and linked to crime and drug violence, by Government ministers no less (in Britain this is illustrated with So Solid Crew incident January of 2003, see below). That a race and class analysis requires more than noticing *where* those who produce the sounds come *from* should be self-evident (even if those who produce the sounds are ‘originally’ out of some version of a so-called ‘ghetto’, their incorporation into the culture industry does not guarantee a general social uplift). Keeping in mind the workings of racism and imperialism, that hip-hop carries the burden of demonization alongside drugs, cars, trainers and guns, has significant consequences for the systemic impoverishment of Black peoples of whatever social status in multi-racial Britain, and across Europe as a whole.

### The tame press

In this context, an ‘over-reverential attitude towards US rap’ in British hip-hop<sup>8</sup> is something to be questioned. While it is true that the ‘variety’ and ‘diversity’ of hip-hop in Europe is often attested to, and offered as criteria for, the maturity and autonomy of the European market in-itself, a cursory glance through any of the music press commentaries will confirm the ways this diversity is conflicted. Britain’s premiere hip-hop magazines, for example, continually carry articles, interviews and reviews that frame evaluation in terms of whether or not UK hip-hop has ‘come of age’. It is indicative to be reassured that there is ‘a healthy UK scene’, as we are with *Knowledge* magazine in an article comparing drum and bass with hip-hop (*Knowledge*, August 2002). In a staged debate (‘Clash of the Titans’) between Rodney P. and Skitz in the magazine *HHC* (July 2002), Rodney P. rails against ‘All this big “UK rap is so fucking great”’ and thinks that the requirement to support UK acts without criticism is ‘nowhere’. Skitz agrees, but argues that the ‘foundation’ has to be strong and has to be sustained by people working on their quality, and he goes on to say ‘A bit of investment in the scene wouldn’t hurt as well’. Rodney P. counters with a comment about how ‘this ain’t no UK rap thing; it’s a hip-hop thing. It’s got to be looked at as global. It’s a big fucking market place and you’ve got to stand up’ (*HHC*, July 2002). Later in the same magazine, Skeme is reported highlighting the broad base of influences behind British rap, and then the reviews section repeats similar refrains, though with more attention to the global. For example, ‘Australian hip-hop suffers the same fate that UK hip-hop did ten years ago. People keep focusing on the origins rather than the music’ (Review of Hilltop Hoods *Left Foot, Right Foot*). The opposition

between national source and quality in the global market clearly occupies minds and pages.

What then of a group that falls over itself to transgress these conventions within the belly of this beastly apparatus? Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental formed back in the early 1990s with their first single, *Janaam* (1992) and were widely praised for their album *Seize the Time* in 1994. The Bobby Seale – Huey P. Newton reference of the title was just one among the many influences that have stayed with the band through numerous line-up changes and mutations – the silhouetted figure of the Black Panther Party leader adorns *There Shall be Love* (2001). Consistency. *Seize the Time* also included the controversial (for MTV, who refused to play it) anti-racist, self-defence anthem *Dog-Tribe* – provoking debates about vigilantism and militancy amongst community youth.<sup>9</sup> That the track and video are still known despite commercial veto<sup>10</sup> indicates the relevance of a more explicit and nuanced agenda within UK hip-hop – one that is engaged with local, and not necessarily just musical, concerns. What is more, Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental have presented, and acted out, their politics as an engaged and revolutionary practice, with rallies, campaign work and activism supplementing the sounds. What the work of Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental means, I think, is that there is scope for an elaborated hip-hop politics that goes beyond banal slogans and imported posturing. This is not to dismiss the musical adventures of the Rap Revolution tour *Party Sampler* (2002), on which Rodney P. and Skitz also appear, and which is dedicated to ‘the brave Sikhs of the Punjab and all other real revolutionaries out there fighting for change’. However, taking into account issues of local activism and engagement, the tendency of commercial media to focus only upon the slogans of revolution as a sensation or as a kind of exotica is something to be guarded against. Sloganeering will minimise and subsume the politics of hip-hop in favour of commerce if it does not come with what used to be called a ‘programme’.

It is my argument that the work of Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental explores their own emergent idiom in a way that can be included within a broad category of hip-hop only if we acknowledge that the notion of hip-hop creatively expands according to who and where the forms are deployed. Hip-hop inflected through Qawaali and the rhythms of the subcontinent owes much less to that derivative labelling of early Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental as the ‘Asian Public Enemy,’ than to adventurous and committed engagement with what is interesting and inspiring, for Nawaz and Watts, in varieties of music not necessarily tuned into the Bronx or South Central. In their survey of the provenance of hip-hop and its arrival in the UK, Hesmondhalgh and Melville stress that derision of early efforts by UK rappers was due to a high value being placed ‘on authenticity above all else’.<sup>11</sup> As the 1980s wore on, the determination to ‘keep it real’<sup>12</sup> and an allegiance to US models of Afrocentric politics, meant British hip-hop struggled to find, but eventually did find, ways to make a mark. That this happened in terms of skills – scratching and mixing – and an influence on other genres is identified by commentators as the source of a more diverse and creative musical spectrum (breakbeat, soul, jungle, trip-hop). However, this is perhaps less important than the idiom that bands like Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental found for their own expression. My argument is that slavish and almost parodic imitation of forms of hip-hop commentary that are also promoted by the culture industry surrounding hip-hop (‘the music, the music’) have singularly failed to comprehend this idiom in a *political* way.

How does this work in the music press? In Britain, the music industry is served by a number of generalist glossy magazines, which used to be ‘inky’ broadsheets of the type that left thumbs stained after reading, and a number of specific niche market, hip-hop magazines that cater for a select audience. That is, there are specific genre magazines and there are the wider music market specials like the *New Music Express*, or *NME*.<sup>13</sup> The ways these magazines address ‘politics’ is itself of interest – often the broader based papers will offer a general survey of political positions for the ‘uninitiated’ or general reader, while the specialist genre press sometimes can have something of a ‘preaching to the converted’ tone. ‘Preaching’ is a major sin for the *NME*, and it indicates a disdain of any political position that stays too far to the left of mild liberal sentiment. Thus, Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental have sometimes run foul of their journalism, and sometimes amusingly run rings around their journalists providing good copy that can show, for example, how the exoticist sensibilities of an enthusiastic but naïve journalist might be exposed by the more nuanced anti-racist politics of a hip-hop outfit. It is exactly their sustained challenge to any subsumption or dilution of their race and class politics that makes the rap of Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental crucial, and critical. Their attitude entails a refusal to compromise that matters in a way that compares favourably with the way most hip-hop acts are discussed in the trade papers and in academic commentary. Here the business-as-usual debate between music and culture distorts into reruns of the US scene – where the imported categories of comprehension polarize between gun-culture and social uplift. The absurdity of politicians condemning British hip-hoppers So Solid Crew for valourising weaponry in lyrics and claiming this leads to deaths such as those of two teenagers at a new years party in 2003, for example, is matched only by certain populist hip-hop acts promoting themselves as the calming and healing influences in a counter intuitive photo opportunity. In the midst of the flash bulbs and self congratulatory awards, the socio economic conditions that encourage gun crime remain firmly offstage, as are the more astute messages of bands like Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental. Here the discussions of the hip-hop press are also found wanting. When *Knowledge* magazine does pay attention to the political pedigree of hip-hop, this is often in a denigrating or tokenistic way. Contradictorily cognizant and dismissive of the ‘origins’ orientation, and equally impatient with ‘preaching’, the tone is one that nods up front to an ‘underground spawned from an urban landscape’ but quickly resorts to discussion of ‘the music’ in a way difficult to distinguish from the press release platitudes of a marketing operation. The paraphrase of press release should be no surprise I guess; a magazine is ultimately also an item up for sale. However, the character of the scene and the flavour of an ‘urban landscape’ are mocked when politicised terms appear in the texts, names and discussions, without any actual or acknowledged political content. Consider, for example, the deployment of notions of what it means to ‘Reprezent’, or of the importance of ‘knowledge’ and education in the Full Cycle ‘camp’, the idea of a ‘campaign’ group (The ‘Wordplay/Full cycle campaign’ *Knowledge* August 2002). All this reinforces the undercurrent of hostility towards ‘preachery’ politics that ensures that the diversity and commitment of hip-hop does not translate onto the global market registers. A critical observer might ask just what is the ‘campaign’, ‘representation’ and ‘knowledge’ all about if industry investment and market share are the primary foci. This might be called complicity.

Before any new preaching starts then, it should be noted that complicity is also complex for Fun<sup>da</sup>mental, primarily because they have long recognized and articulated the credo of Rakim. The necessity and justice of getting paid for cultural production in a cultural economy cannot be doubted. Fair dues are owed to all concerned. Aki Nawaz asks, 'Where is the payback? I want to see the payback' on *Erotic Terrorism* (1999), but he has in mind a return investment on hundreds of years of global plunder, not just a royalty cheque today. Fun<sup>da</sup>mental have always articulated this in a double engagement that seems honest to ideas of a hip-hop ethic. The music industry is a platform. For example, to take another of the key words in the repertoire of culture commentary, 'visibility' is a means to express a perspective that would otherwise be ignored. Visibility itself is much discussed by academics in relation to Black people in the media. It is enough to quote Sanjay Sharma (Sharma *et al.*, 1996) who pointed out, at the launch of a cultural studies think book called *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: the Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, that 'it used to be you'd see Sheila Chandra on Top of the Pops and go 'oh look, Asians on the telly''. Now it seems we are visible everywhere'. The burden of *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* was that this visibility was still very much complicit with and subsumed under the commercial imperatives and fashions of the media. Asian music, of which Fun<sup>da</sup>mental were the primary exponents, were suddenly cool, diversity was in, difference and *desi* dominated the airwaves. In London, throughout the late 1990s and especially in 2002, the fascination for things South Asian has been unprecedented, exceeding even the 1960s hippy times. Superstores like Selfridges celebrate Asian commerce. TV stations like Channel Four present an 'Indian Summer' of Asian cultural programming (never mind that Asian and India are not exact equivalents, that Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, not to mention China, Japan, Malaysia *et al.* are occluded in British use here). Musical stage shows such as Andrew Lloyd Weber's 'Bombay Dreams' attract sell-out audiences. The National Film Theatre reruns Satyajit Ray in the Imagine Asia cinema series. The Barbican weighs in with the films of Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, and there are many more examples. Curious then that all this 'visibility' coincides with massive racial conflict in the areas of South Asian settlement in Britain (Oldham, Bradford); there is resurgence of far right anti-immigration politics, with both fringe groups like the British National Party winning council seats in Burnley, and within the Government Home Minister, David Blunkett's, attacks on and deportation of asylum seekers. This is not even to question yet the obvious hypocrisy of a general interest in Asian music, culture and food (PM's consort Cherie Blair wears a 'vote-winning' sari to a Government function supporting the 200 richest business men in England) just as other Asians in Afghanistan are obliterated in a bombing campaign of unprecedented excess. Never was the moment of 'origin' of Asian visibility in UK rap so revealing as when the political 'content' of Fun<sup>da</sup>mental's anti-racist message was occluded under a fear of 'militant Islam'. We have been here before – the duet of exotica and fanatica as the projected fears of white supremacy, castigating Black culture as dangerous and other; on the one hand strangely alien or 'ethnic', on the other hand a threat. Scare-mongering and cultural 'hybridity' are emphasised together – the racist agenda of marketing diversity within limits is locked and loaded.<sup>14</sup>

Along the way, the notion of 'hybridity' has become a safe way to categorize difficult cultural matter. Hybridity, as cultural fusion, covers anything that has not managed to fit neatly into the middle-England aspirations of the commissars of

cultural industry propriety. Under the sign of the ‘hybrid’, Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental’s project can be dismissed as a consequence of cultural clash and the teething problems of an immigrant population – and its ‘youth element’ – yet to assimilate to British ways. That this kind of delusion would be rejected by Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental is a matter of course, but along this line media stereotypes of a very familiar vein have often been deployed.<sup>15</sup> An example gleaned from the weekly press as I write, Britain’s serious liberal broadsheet, *The Guardian*, announces a ‘special investigation’ into the activities of Asian youth gangs in Oldham and Bradford, where Nawaz’s family lives. In the course of sensationalising a story, the paper characterises members of these ‘gangs’ in a way that owes as much to Hollywood and MTV fantasies as it does to the UK scene. ‘Asian role models’ for our Guardian correspondent are described as: ‘gold chain wearing drug traffickers with their new BMW cars, souped-up hi-fi systems and latest designer sportswear’ (*Guardian* 14 July, 2002). This is a blatant scare story, calculated to deploy stereotypes as counterpoint to Government activity in other areas – a new war on drugs, anti-crime hysteria, and anti-immigration feeling. The few anecdotes offered as evidence are of course misleading by any standard of examination of the activity of South Asians in Britain, and yet. The same may be said in Brixton and in Glasgow. There is, at least, a long and critical evaluation of this replication of pathologies of youth culture in the media by way of Black academic critique of scare-stories about graffiti, fights at clubs, gangs and, of course, gun culture.<sup>16</sup> There will always be some exceptional recourse to bad apple stories, but these stories are exceptions and usually a consequence of playing to the crowd, usually on the part of tabloid journalists, but not in all cases. In Oldham and Bradford, the agenda also serves as justification of the harsher than expected sentences (of up to five years) handed down to Asian participants in the ‘disturbances’ of 2001.<sup>17</sup> The more difficult reporting that would challenge template editorialising and conservative stitch-ups requires more considered work, perhaps even a new investigative methodology. Credible mainstream media would be welcome here, but expectations of adequate and sympathetic reporting of black experience, let alone youth hip-hop culture cannot be high. Let us turn to the music press again – where despite the promise entailed in a political heritage unrivalled by any other artistic form (‘Hip-hop as Black people’s CNN’, etc), it is unusual today to find serious and sustained political commentary in the hip-hop press, beyond the occasional guest spot rant from a founding father (Chuck D. editorials for example, *HHC*, July 2002). I looked in vain for commentary on Bradford; the platitudes of New Year 2003 gun deaths were predictable. How commercialism tones down social criticism, and encloses and contains it within restricted boundaries is illustrated yet again in the magazine majority focus on technology, fashion and product reviews. In the final mix, the nether pages of the magazines offer a dark inverse of the political action that Chuck D., or Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, exhorts – instead the mantra of purchase, buy and consume. Motives become motivations to market.

### **Simon says: the hegemony of market power**

The demonization of Islam was established in the wake of Soviet Communism’s collapse. The early moves that manufactured a new enemy have now been replaced by

the crusading ‘war on terror’, which targets Asians of all stripes within and beyond national borders and the rule of law, and irrespective of any consideration of allegiance to peace, civic life, evidence, coherence. With this context in mind, we might consider skirmishes of the music market as little more than incidental. However, politicised motivation was never more explicit than in the response of Paul Simon to Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental’s ‘crossover’ efforts on the album *Erotic Terrorism* (1999). The reconstructed world music impresario’s follow-up album after *Graceland* (1987) was called *The Rhythm of the Saints* (1990). It used recordings of a town square performance by the Brazilian percussion ensemble Olodum, which were taken back to New York where Simon ‘improvised music and words over them and added other layers of music’.<sup>18</sup> Taylor adds that ‘it is Simon who profits – his position in a powerful economic centre – the United States, a major corporation – means that he cannot escape its centrality, despite his assertion that he works “outside the mainstream”’.<sup>19</sup> It is then, curious to compare the moment of appropriation – another key misleading term – with a parallel incident. When Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental recorded a version of Paul Simon’s song *The Sounds of Silence* for inclusion on *Erotic Terrorism*, their request to clear copyright for the sample was refused. Asked for permission once again, Simon was offered the publishing rights for the new version, with an additional backing vocal, but ‘Mr World Music’ again said ‘no’, citing legal precepts and refusing further discussion (author interview with Aki Nawaz). Noting the power of some musician-entrepreneurs to own and control, and the cap in hand reliance on name stars and gatekeepers for those who might want to breach the conventions of music industry protocol, the track was renamed *Deathening Silence*, sample removed. The retelling of these whispered tales about Paul Simon is not to make an equation between the selfish, or rather self-interested, conceits of copyright legalise and the more serious debacles of racism, anti-Islamic profiling and the anti-people pogroms of the state machine. However, who would be surprised if someone did equate such ‘cultural’ power with the way the war on terror legislates special rules that permit detention without charge or trial in the USA, the UK, Australia, Malaysia, etc? Even though such a connection was anticipated in Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental’s ironic album title reference, *Erotic Terrorism*. Thinking of the Detention Camps in Afghanistan and Iraq, certainly there is some credence to Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental’s pre-September 11, 2001, prophecy that ‘America Will Go to Hell’ – in their anti-war anthem EP release from the same period as *Deathening Silence* (*Why America Will Go To Hell*, 1999). The use of hip-hop to express a critique of American (and United Nations, NATO or British Military) imperialist activities makes Paul Simon’s legal enforcement of silence something less than neutral and this conjunction surely indicates a more nuanced relationship between politics and content than the unidirectionalist historians of hip-hop might warrant. The ‘deathening silence’ here is not only a comment on record industry ownership of lyric and melody, but also references the ways commercial imperatives sanction quietude about the politics of so-called anti-terrorism and the inadequacy of romantic and liberal anti-racism. No mere hybridity, Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental’s call is to fight against the seductive terrorisms of complicity and conformity, the manipulation of market and law, the destruction of culture and civilisation in pursuit of oil.

What kind of change in the apparatus of the culture industry would be required to orient attention away from the industrial military entertainment complex? What



would displace the ways people in the music press and mainstream academic community consistently deploy categories that are far removed from the actualities articulated in the Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental discussion? These critics appear deaf to ideas. I think it is clear that many misconceptions come from well-intentioned deployment of arguments around terms like ‘visibility’, ‘appropriation’ ‘complicity’ and ‘commerce’. That it is no surprise that intentions and their effects are readily undone is almost a platitude. The solution is not to insist on the correctness of an alternate interpretation<sup>20</sup> and it is equally not the case that insistence on fidelity to the source material will redeem all (but listening to the albums and checking the websites is worthwhile – combating sanctioned ignorance advanced through media bias is an obligation we must all take up<sup>21</sup>). These are probably the predictable moves others have already made. However, if raising questions about complacency in commentary adds impetus to the work of showing where a critique of unexamined complicity and marketing zeal restrict possibilities, then the opening is important.

Does Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental offer something altogether different to this sanitized music industry version of hip-hop that I am castigating as the conventional press release and expectation-driven cringe of European b-boys with a culture complex? My interest is to consider why a group like Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, that has been, however precariously, aligned with UK rap over many years, must be portrayed as a group whose activities fall outside the interests of the music industry coverage of conventional material. Am I prejudiced in insisting that activities that are excess to music industry convention make hip-hop more interesting than the trade papers and academics would tell us? And paradoxically, does this indeed make Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental an ‘Asian Public Enemy’, more akin to US based hip-hop proselytizing of Chuck D., or a Michael Franti of the Disposable Heroes of old, railing against injustice. Perhaps even the spirit of the Last Poets, who should get a mention here (but this ‘white man got a god complex’ too, says Banerjea<sup>22</sup>). It is the case that the old routine accusations of compromise and conformity to token ‘rebellion’ must be ones that wear thin for performers who have sustained political engagement for so long. The drone of the old ‘sell-out’ formula of recent arrivee purists must be annoying. Witness, for example, the necessity of Nawaz making statements that the politics of the album – *There Shall be Love* – could be taken as too complicated to explain without seeming ‘anal’ (this for a primarily non-English vocals album<sup>23</sup>). How did it come to pass that an album that moves across borders in a political and cultural exchange dedicated to resistance and creativity should *not* be discussed as such?

Instead of demanding Aki explain all, it might be worth looking to a few words of Chuck D. himself on the ‘origins’, where he insists on keeping in mind the need to respect those who did the work that made hip-hop a crossover export culture in the first place. The global reach of hip-hop now extends across all borders and includes massive ‘non-Black’ support (Chuck D., *HHC* July 2002).<sup>24</sup> The respect called for here has cultural characteristics too, it is respect for the cultural forms, its innovation *and* its political ethic – it is no surprise that the legend of the urban streetscape starts with ‘making something outta ashes as Bam and Herc did within a depleted NY school system in the 1970s’ (Chuck D., *HHC* July 2002). The co-ordinates here are politically and not immediately market-oriented. The global extension of hip-hop culture follows suit in a way – it is thankfully not always the case that every time someone mentions the fact that hip-hop is global that the global marketing of hip-hop

as industry is what they have in mind. Conversely, in the music press it is nearly always the case, since journalists in the sway of commerce think 'market' where the diversity and spread of culture is concerned. They do seem less alive to the problematic politics of the cultural and with their platitudes seem often to elide, deflect or misconstrue sharp conflict in the interests of a kind of variety store orientalism. They focus on hip-hop as the end product of an assembly line machine, rather than as culture, politics or struggle.

Does it seem naïve to think attention to the politics of hip-hop in its global formations might offer a further development of critical perspectives? Is there no chance of indicating where we might see things differently than the way we do through already given and unexamined categories? It may be my particular reading, but I want to ask just why almost every essay on music starts by acknowledging Adorno's critique of the regression in listening only to then go on to ignore that critique in order to redeem contemporary music? Too many complementary albums perhaps? It seems to me that a music locked into routines formularised as origins is a music of limits, and this is just what Adorno warned against when he railed against obedience to the rhythm, predictable innovations that are nothing but variants, the standardised performance or the oppositional stance. Against this, the secret omnipresence of resistance in hip-hop might be that hip-hop which breaks continually with the conventions of origins. Qawaali, Bengali, Mahgreb, Palestine – the continued promiscuity of hip-hop as inclusive creative local political movement outweighs the considerations of an historian's protocol. For what is important in hip-hop? Is it two turntables, scratching, the cross fader or the MC? All of these technical innovations would amount to nothing but sales graphs for Technics and stores that sold two copies of each piece of new vinyl to Herc, where once they might have sold just one. No, what is important in hip-hop is its expressive content, in terms of culture, politics, social response and diversity. Hip-hop is nothing if it does not reach from Public Enemy and NWA to ADF, the Prophets of Da City and Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, *et al.* We should always be suspicious of arguments that assert technology as the means and motive of change. For several reasons such views are faulty – from the progress narrative ever so compatible with consumer marketing to the Heideggerian notion of enframing – the critique of technological determinism is well grounded, though often ignored. Herc may have used the turntable as developed by Technics, but he had to get up and use it – hip-hop was as much born of creative street level innovation as technological progress and the content and context of the music was as important as the sounds. The absolutely crucial context for understanding hip-hop today is the struggle against imperialism abroad and racism at home. There is no other way to make sense of the sounds.

So this is the justification for why I focus upon these extra curricular activities of Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental in an article that should be about 'the music'. No doubt, the discrepant activities of Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental are worth examining in themselves, but for me it means more as part of a musical tradition that exceeds art and cultural industry conventions to be a part of lifestyle and politics. By this focus, I believe we recapture what is specific to UK hip-hop as well as that which translates and equates that hip-hop with respect for the original forms from the US. The music industrial complex, its institutions, record execs and admen are not the arbiters of the limits and character of hip-hop's global appeal – this process, this form, is more than the trade papers say. It

means more – and less. Hip-hop is the vehicle of an idiom that rejects global terror refracted through the racism of the Empire, and Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental are among the forefront of those articulating this sentiment despite the ideological saccharine of the various presses. Of course, by focusing on political work open questions remain – least of all that adequate political interventions cannot be made by a pop group alone, but rather require at the very least a mass mobilisation of trained and disciplined cadre ready to assault the state where it lives. What is required to rebuild civil society torn asunder by the revenge opportunism of George W. Bush and his appealing ‘Foreign Ambassador’ Blair? What is required to recharge a redistributive project of a radical democracy? These are hard questions. Nevertheless, in the absence of disciplined cadres, attention to these questions in place of the sweet lullabies upon which the music press would most times rather dwell, may expose the alibi-lullaby for what it is – time to wake up and Fight the European Power too. Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental have been doing so for years.

The discrepant politics of Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental has been consistent in this regard. The primacy of the politics has never been compromised before the necessity of commercial engagement. The media circus has not become an enclosure for them. Nawaz speaks at the music carnivalesque rallies of the anti-racist left, performs at the conferences and seminars of the socialist workers party (note – speaks at a music festival, performs at a political meeting, this itself is contrapuntal in a good way). Apologizing not at all for transgressions, he is invited onto television programmes as a musician and leaves as an orator, or is edited out as an angry young man. He writes, ‘All the political statements have been made and we stand by every one ... there is and will always be those people who have no interest in bringing people together, who have no enlightenment or ambition to see from different perspectives, who will always say the most ridiculous and be entertained by the most powerful’ (*There Shall be Love*, 2001). With a constant web presence as well, distributing a range of commentaries on contemporary issues from September 11 and Palestine to Bradford and Oldham, the political exceeds the enclosures of the cultural industry category of ‘music’ in interesting ways – and this is just what hip-hop at its best also strives to achieve.

Paul Simon, however, acts as a classic mercantile imperial plantation master. His cultural property – *Sounds of Silence* – can be protected by law while he can happily sample Olodum at one moment and prevent Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental from sampling him at another. There are vexed questions about appropriation and ownership here, with many worries about the association of sound and culture. Is music a cultural property? Is there a UK hip-hop? Is the notion of ‘Asian’ music coherent? Is crossover a misrepresentation of the authentic? If, as is often recognized in academic discussion, everything is hybrid and there is no ‘pure’ source, it becomes clear that only in the weird and privileged world of commerce can anyone ‘own’ music. Much ink spilled. There is obviously a world of difference between the lawyer-protected borrowings of Mr Paul Simon (inc.) and the politics of creative mixing. Appropriation itself is not the worry, expropriation and profiteering are. It is not what you take, its who you take it from, what you give in return, and what you do with it. This is the context for understanding the efforts of Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental to contrast the sounds of silence with the deafening injustice of theft, violence and death meted out with regular and calculated fury by the rich and well-connected upon the poor. This understanding is too often left unheard.

## Reckoning with the terms

If we consider the implications and consequences of rethinking the way that culture commentary deals with the politics of hip-hop in the UK, there needs to be a radical change in the role of writing and commentary. Hip-hop sensibilities might be useful here, but also a more informative and sustaining political journalism would be required. There would be good reason to have journalists listen and learn from the extensive documentation in hip-hop lyricism of the crimes of the police, deaths in custody, stop and search, etc. and then to ask where, for example, a journalism that deals with police crime could be printed?<sup>25</sup> At what point would it be considered legitimate for a hip-hop magazine to publish detailed investigations of the oppressive asylum and immigration, or various anti-terror legislations being rushed into law across so much of the planet? Michael Franti again, with Spearhead and the album *Stay Human*, attempted something like this on campaigning against the death penalty. A few interviews and feature articles aside, Franti's departure from the commercial magazines to the more interactive writing engagement of webzines and the internet was almost inevitable (but see *Get Rhythm*, May 2001). This prompts questions about writing on the web as a mode of immediate discussion that breaks with corporate publishing, but no, web-based commentary seems to take up product-review culture anew when it comes to discussions of 'the music'; alongside an astonishing mobilisation of alternative and diverse opinion against 'the war'. Here a critical approach developed by showing what was wrong with the everyday banality of press release driven commentary is the only possible way to avoid the crushing disappointment that commercialised life entails (when getting paid turns into being under-paid by the ultra-arrogant west-coast promo-men).

An alternative to this bifurcated world of hype on the one hand, mostly silenced alternatives on the other, would require a music criticism that engaged complicity, visibility and the market with an uncompromising attention to the political. Is it merely expectation or habit, or is it an irrevocable *demand*, that we evaluate music in terms of music industry criteria? Is not this a limiting factor in analytic work that should always be challenged? The musicological discipline at one end, and the commercial press release routine of the sales pitch at the other – two sides of a broken appropriation that together cannot yet add up to appreciation. Of course practitioners and commentators (like me) are always so caught up in these routines that complicity often goes unremarked in the nooks and crannies of the vast hybridising machine. Why write on music when death and destruction rain from the sky? It is probably not such a great alternative to approach music first as political, since no doubt the corraling effects of market segmentation ensure that manoeuvre has been anticipated, but that such approaches are so often excoriated in the press and the institutions suggests a lacunae that deserves airplay so audiences can choose a different view. Otherwise, why so much grief?

In addition, why is this significant for Europe? Why has there been all this worry about the source? (Is it only an anxiety about authenticity, or does the essentialism of roots run too deep?). It would do, to disorientate, just to consider what hip-hop would look like if thought about and rewritten with a 'centre' located outside the conventional 'home' locations – instead of New York and LA, say Newcastle or New Delhi perhaps, Sydney, or somewhere in Malaysia. Moreover, the first moves are not

the be all and end all of this – there is no reason to look merely to the Black Atlantic<sup>26</sup> or to Black Paris<sup>27</sup> to disrupt all too easy ‘versionings’. What could we make of a music form delivered by satellite alongside, and reinterpreted by, Bollywood playback, Qawaali mystics and satellite TV VJs, that took up the political border-crossings of Fun^da^mental and made music and message mean again?<sup>28</sup> Against the war, the planetary mix is becoming ever more visible in hip-hop with recognition that there are British, Italian, German, Australian, Asian and Fijian forms (etc.) at the same time that the form is universal. Unity in diversity. However, visibility is only a moment of a process necessarily reified the dialectical character congeals around identity at a standstill.<sup>29</sup> To stop at the visibility of diversity is only one part of a process; the visible is only a platform, a first stage. Complicity is the next target in the deceptions of the market, thence appropriation and articulation. It is important to recognise that names, images, visions, myths are snapshots of something that moves; something that cannot be so readily enclosed unless the terms of enclosure are accepted within.

Against the terminology of an unexamined complicity, mere visibility, rainbow hybridity and jealous appropriation, what chance is there for public recognition – written and published, widely discussed – of the engaged Fun^da^mental hip-hop sensibilities of practitioners and audiences? What about the concerns of the hip-hop public itself, are they not of greater significance? It is the deathening silences that commercial imperatives impose upon the coherence (the sounds and the politics) of hip-hop that seem the most ideological here; not censorship so much as failure of vision, blinded by complicity, unable to participate in the heterogeneity of life, stuck with defending – intentionally or unintentionally – a bland homogeneity. Can we not hope for, work for, a commentary that reports condemnation of the stupid war on drugs, which criminalises pleasure while providing alibis for the mass chemical poisonings of the street quality lottery; opposition to the imperial ambitions of Bush and Blair, there being little desire or interest on the part of most people in their oil-fuelled deadly geopolitics on behalf of corporate empire and the armaments industry; reconfiguration of the space of political participation and community involvement instead of the pseudo-democracy of balloting and riot cop crackdowns on dissent; dreams of freedom; creative science; conscious poetic militancy; free-form riotous thought-crime joy; respect and communication instead of patronizing market segmentation; insight and meaning and enthusiasm and spirit; redress and recompense and unemployment for all (not just the idle rich); radical redistribution and enhanced quality of liveliness, planetary and large? All this is in the music, why is it not in the industry press reportage? Some may call it romantic Fun^da^mentalism, but it takes the globalisation of billions to hold us back. This is an obvious reminder of what commentary on hip-hop might be – it could be much more – this still is not the film, the revolution is not yet televised, the medium is not the message. These few notes are not yet a programme.

## Discography

Asian Dub Foundation, *R.A.F.I.* Diffusion, 1997  
 Fun^da^mental, *Janaam*. Nation, 1992

- Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, *Sister India*. Nation, 1993  
 Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, *Seize the Time*. Nation, 1994  
 Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, *GodDevil*. Nation, 1996  
 Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, *Why America will go to Hell*. Nation, 1999  
 Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, *Erotic Terrorism*. Nation, 1999  
 Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental, *There Shall be Love*. Nation, 2001  
 Rap Revolution Tour, *Party Sampler*. Titan Sounds, 2002  
 Paul Simon, *Graceland*. Warner Brothers, 1987  
 Paul Simon, *The Rhythm of the Saints*. Warner Brothers, 1990

## Notes

- 1 Previous work has documented some of this, in particular the controversy around the Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental track 'Dog Tribe' which was dismissed, distorted and informally 'banned' in 1994. For an extended discussion, see Hutnyk, 1996.
- 2 Theodor Adorno, 1999, p.2.
- 3 Tony Mitchell, 2001, p.1
- 4 Mitchell 2001, p.11
- 5 Paul Gilroy made this connection at Goldsmiths College some years ago, Simon Frith did the same at Keele University in 1995.
- 6 That ADF picked up hip-hop influences in France (arguably the largest market for such music outside the USA) and that Fun<sup>^</sup>da<sup>^</sup>mental influenced and were in turn influenced by, among many, hip-hoppers from South Africa, as well as Qawaali from Pakistan, should not go unremarked. The map of hip-hop creativity and diffusion does not lead back to nodes in America in every case. English rapping graphed over inner London Bengali rhythm guitar makes it big in Paris and in Japan. The old tale about Herc in the Bronx is honoured but no longer an immediate ancestor.
- 7 Ted Swedenburg, 2001, p.56
- 8 David Hesmondhalgh and Caspar Melville, 2001, p.87.
- 9 Sanjay Sharma *et al.*, 1996.
- 10 MTV 'banned' the video, but were happy enough to use the opening refrain of the song – 'what's the thing that makes a Black man insane ... primitive ... primitive' as the soundtrack to a 'Pulse' fashion show special on Black hair styles. This is extensively discussed in Hutnyk, 2000, chapter 3.
- 11 Hesmondhalgh and Melville, 2001, p.92.
- 12 For a detailed discussion of the industrial dynamic of this overloaded term, see Basu, 1998.
- 13 Famously, at an academic music conference some years ago, a European colleague was puzzled by a seminar presenter's condemnation of the *NME*. Not quite getting the nuance of the abbreviation, but in a revealing insight in any case, the questioner wanted to know just who was this 'enemy' and if there had been sufficient precautions taken to ensure they would not attack the conference (personal communication from Dave Hesmondhalgh, then organising the International Association for the Study of Popular Music).
- 14 There are numerous sources of comparable material addressing US versions of this same routine. First and foremost, among these I think is Vijay Prashad's admirable study: *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*, Prashad, 2001. See also *The Karma of Brown*

- Folk*, Prashad, 2000, and the 'Satyagraha in America' issue of *Amerasia Journal*, Mathew and Prashad, eds 1999–2000. A volume specifically devoted to music and politics in Asia that deserves attention is *Refashioning Pop Music in Asia*, Chun, Rossiter and Shoesmith, eds, 2004, and the special issues on 'Music and Politics' in the journals *Theory Culture and Society* 17.3 (2000) and *Postcolonial Studies* 1.3 (1998), should be consulted.
- 15 Though stressing the 'productive syncretism of diasporic cultures' and deploying an uncritical notion of 'new ethnic identities', Hesmondhalgh and Melville, (2001, p. 87), are among the few critics wary of the term hybridity as a description of hip-hop 'adapted for use in very different performative and institutional circumstances from those found in the USA', (p. 86).
- 16 See Stuart Hall *et al.*, 1978, and Clare Alexander 2000 for an up-to-date review.
- 17 See Virinder Kalra 2002.
- 18 Interview with Bob Edwards, quoted in Timothy Taylor, 1997, p. 64.
- 19 Taylor, 1997, p. 203.
- 20 See Virinder Kalra and John Hutnyk, 1998, and Sanjay Sharma and John Hutnyk, 2000.
- 21 The term 'sanctioned ignorance' is from the ever-insightful Gayatri Spivak, 1999.
- 22 Koushik Banerjea, 1999, p.22
- 23 See Kalra, 2000, on the politics of necessary translation.
- 24 It is also worth noting that Chuck D. has initiated his own South Asian – British crossover adventure, coming to London to perform on stage with ADF in summer 2004, in support of the West Indian cricket tour, no less.
- 25 This, I am afraid, is personal as I have now a collection of 19 rejection letters from publishers who, with Anandi Ramamurthy, Ken Fero and Tariq Mehmood, I had offered a book of essays and the shooting script of the controversial film on deaths in police custody, *Injustice* (directed by Ken Fero and Tariq Mehmood). No one wants to touch it because of the accusation in the film that the officers who arrested Brian Douglas were murderers. Screening details and more on the film is available at [www.injusticefilm.co.uk](http://www.injusticefilm.co.uk)
- 26 Paul Gilroy, 1993.
- 27 Benetta Jules-Rosette, 1998.
- 28 Alternatively, what to make of crossover as massacred (a subjective, but legitimate view I think) by a Portuguese-Malay nightclub singer in an obscure tourist trail club on the west coast of the peninsular. Big-up to the outstandingly surreal Bobby Fernandez at Malacca's 'Loony Planet', Malaysian residency, April 2002?
- 29 See Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on this, in Adorno, 1970/1997, p. 176.

## References

- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Athlone Press, 1970/1997.
- Adorno, Theodor. *Sound Figures*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Alexander, Clare. *The Asian Gang*. Oxford: Berg, 2000.
- Banerjea, Koushik. 'Ni-Ten-Ichi-Ryu: Enter the World of the Smart-Stepper'. *Travel Worlds: Journeys in Contemporary Cultural Politics*. Eds Raminder Kaur and John Hutnyk. London: Zed Books, 1999. 14–28.
- Basu, Dipa. 'What's real about "Keeping it Real"?' *Postcolonial Studies* 1.3 (1998): 371–87.

- Chun, Allen, Ned Rossiter and Brian Shoosmith, Eds. *Refashioning Pop Music in Asia*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2004.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Hall, Stuart, Charles Critchner and Tony Jefferson, *et al.* *Policing the Crisis*. Palgrave: Macmillan, 1978.
- Hesmondhalgh, David and Caspar Melville. 'Urban Breakbeat Culture: Repercussions of Hip-Hop in the United Kingdom'. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*. Ed. Tony Mitchell. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 86–110.
- Hutnyk, John. 'Repetitive Beatings of Criminal Justice'. *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*. Eds S. Sharma, J. Hutnyk and A. Sharma. London: Zed Books, 1996. 156–89.
- Hutnyk, John. *Critique of Exotica: Music, Politics and the Culture Industry*. London: Pluto Press, 2000.
- Jules-Rosette, Benetta. *Black Paris*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.
- Kalra, Virinder and John Hutnyk. 'Music and Politics – special section'. *Postcolonial Studies* 1.3 (1998): 335–38.
- Kalra, Virinder. 'Vilayeti Rhythms: Beyond Bhangra's Emblematic Status to a Translation of Lyrical Texts'. *Theory Culture & Society* 17.3 (2000): 83–105.
- Kalra, Virinder. 'Balance of Law?: Riots or Rebellion and the Tariffs of Racist Policing'. *Oldham Red Notes* 17 (2002): 12–3.
- Mathew, Biju and Vijay Prashad, Eds. 'Satyagraha in America'. *Amerasia Journal* 25.3 (1999/2000): ix–xv.
- Mitchell, Tony. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- Prashad, Vijay. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Prashad, Vijay. *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.
- Sharma, Sanjay and John Hutnyk. 'Music and Politics – special section'. *Theory Culture and Society* 17.3 (2000): 55–63.
- Sharma, Sanjay, John Hutnyk and Ashwani Sharma. *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: the Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*. London: Zed Books, 1996.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Swedenburg, Ted. 'Islamic Hip-Hop Versus Islamophobia: Aki Nawaz, Natacha Atlas, Akhenaton'. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*. Ed. Tony Mitchell. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. 57–85.
- Taylor, Timothy. *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

---

**John Hutnyk** is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Cultural Studies and Anthropology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is the author of several books, including: *Bad Marxism: Capitalism and Cultural Studies* (Pluto Press, 2004); *Critique of Exotica: Music, Politics and the Culture Industry* (Pluto Press, 2000); and *The Rumour of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity and the Poverty of Representation* (Zed Books 1996).

---