

Interview with Zaheer Ali

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INTERVIEWER

What is one of the earliest and most influential adoptions of Malcolm X into the world of music and the hip-hop community?

ZAHEER ALI

Probably the first time that Malcolm is sampled on a commercial hip-hop release would be Keith LeBlanc's "No Sell Out." I believe the track was released in 1983 by Tommy Boy Records and it basically features the early break beats that were used by break-dancers. Keith LeBlanc was a producer that put together a lot of those drum tracks for a lot of the rap groups that were on the Tommy Boy Records label. And it features that audio track with a sample of Malcolm's speech, the speech that he gave after his house was firebombed and that's all it is: a loop and sample of Malcolm speaking excerpts from different speeches, primarily the one he gave after the fire bombing of his home. And it began a wave of sampling Malcolm's voice in hip-hop. Many artists following Keith LeBlanc would follow his example in sampling Malcolm.

This particular record is unique, because Malcolm is actually credited as the songwriter, the lyrics writer for the record, and his family received royalties from the sale of the record. That's unique because for a lot of the later samples before the sampling laws went into effect, Malcolm wasn't credited, obviously, nor did his family receive any royalties. It was an interesting controversy that arose when the record came out, because Keith LeBlanc is white, and I believe he shopped the record with another [label], but they did not want to come up with an agreement that would give the family of Malcolm any royalties. So he took it to Tommy Boy, and Tommy Boy worked that deal out. And initially folks were kind of upset that Malcolm was being used in this way. But when the record came out, [there] was a kind of intro, a preface, on the sleeve of the vinyl by Betty Shabazz, endorsing the record and that kind of quieted the opposition. But again, it would begin a wave of Malcolm's voice in hip-hop.

Another early example of Malcolm's influence in not only national American, black-American culture, but internationally, is in Miriam Makeba's performance of "Malcolm X," which is taken from a live performance record. Miriam Makeba has a very interesting background that linked her to a freedom struggle. She's South African, and I believe she was exiled from South Africa and could not return for many years. She was first married to Hugh Masekela, who was a South African artist. Then later she married Stokely Carmichael, who was one of the founders of the Black Power movement in America and one of the activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who later became involved with the Black Panther Party. So Miriam Makeba was linked in her personal life to strong, activist roots. The track "Malcolm" is a tribute. It's reflecting. In terms of the music, it's pretty much world music. It's a praise song for Malcolm: Eeveryone is talking revolution, but no one seems to remember Brother Malcolm. You

know, he was the one who started this all” is essentially the idea that she's expressing in the song.

INTERVIEWER

What artists were most successful in following LeBlanc's sampling? Who helped shaped the current legacy of Malcolm X within the hip-hop community?

ZAHEER ALI

Whenever you talk about hip-hop and Malcolm, probably the first group that comes to mind is Public Enemy because they were so influenced by Malcolm. I think he's either referenced or used in about four or five of the tracks in their recording catalogue. One of the earliest is *Bring The Noise*, which appears on their album *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*. In that, they open the record with excerpts of Malcolm speaking that they join together. One is taken from a part of the speech where Malcolm says, “too black.” Another is taken from another part of the speech where Malcolm says, “too strong,” and they put the two together to come up with the phrase *too black, too strong*, which would become a chant by a lot of activists later on, influenced by the record. So in a sense, this is an important moment where we see how Malcolm is not only being used, but his voice is being reshaped. And they put the two together to come up with the phrase, *too black, too strong*. Which would become a chant by a lot of activists later on, influenced by the record. So in a sense, this is an important moment where we see how Malcolm is not only being used, but his voice is being reshaped and his words being put together through the art of sampling, to come up with a new phrase or a new idea, juxtaposing two ideas to come up with one synthesis.

INTERVIEWER

What are some of the themes that surround the use of Malcolm X in music?

ZAHEER ALI

One aspect of Malcolm X's life and legacy that seems to recur and particularly resonate with the generation of artists who produced hip-hop records in the early '90s, was how he was killed. Malcolm was assassinated on February 21st, 1965, in the Audubon Ballroom, by a black man. It was very different than Martin King's assassination or some of the other murders that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. In the case of Malcolm, the way that his assassination is looked at by a lot of younger artists in the '90s is from the perspective of black-on-black crime, a sense of great betrayal that Malcolm would be killed by one of his own. In the track *Welcome to the Terrordome* by Public Enemy, this scene plays out where Chuck D raps: “you know, a black hand squeezed on Malcolm X the man,” pointing out that, “every brother ain't a brother”—just because you're black doesn't mean that you're part of the struggle.

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