

CRITIQUE

FAMILY VALUES OR HOMEBOY VALUES: THE QUESTION OF ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

by Richard "Frosted" Shusterman

Arrested Development is certainly one of the great rap successes of this past year, garnering prestigious awards (two Grammy's) and a distinctive role in Spike Lee's epic film on Malcolm X. There's no doubt that their music is def, and their mix of rap with more traditional melodic and harmonic elements has won them a lot of extra fans, particularly a large cross-over audience of listeners who don't appreciate rap's hardcore, no frills, straight-up style. But music is not the only thing that is winning awards and a large commercial audience for Arrested Development. The message of their poetry is also very appealing to a large cross-over population, because it preaches some of the most sacred values of mainstream American society. Yet, at the same time, the group also seeks to engage and inspire rap's primary audience: young black brothers and sisters in the inner cities of America who feel oppressed by mainstream America and are tired of its preaching. I want to dedicate my column of critique to examining Arrested Development's complex message as expressed in their hit album 3 Years, 5 Months, and 2 Days in the Life of...

This message can be understood as advocating certain values of bourgeois ideology over values that are typically (and unjustly) associated with ghetto life. But simply to preach the Man's values over the ghetto's would mean alienating a large part of the rap audience, so this preaching must be mixed with a call for revolution to displace the Man's oppressive "system" which imposed and maintains the evil of ghetto living. The mainstream values that are being preached can best be summarized by the term "family values". For the idea of family is crucially important to this group which describes itself on the album notes as the "Arrested Development Family" rather than using the ghetto associated terms of "crew" or "posse". And like that old sixties cross-over group, Sly and the Family Stone, this one includes both men and women, just as traditional families do.

But the mainstream family values of Arrested Development go beyond the question of



family. For example, the first central value that the album praises is discipline. This solid value of America's puritan work ethic is advocated as the way out of poverty. In "Give a Man a Fish", the group attributes their survival and success to "9 to 5" labor, because "we worked real hard to get this far". Discipline is also the key to liberation from the ghetto

*So you say you want out of the ghetto
First the political prisoners must be let go
And you must be let go by your power master,
Malt liquor got you licked
You'll never get out without much discipline
Raise your fist but also raise your children*

Here we see the link between discipline and family values which is developed in the morally high-minded love song "U"

*Marriage takes discipline.
A problem that exists within
American Culture...
So hey I pray for the day I have a strong wife
And a strong son or daughter or strong both
Give them a foundation of values.*

Family values is what Speech (the group's main lyricist) is romanticizing. He wants:

*Five decades more of a life
with a wife an 2 or 3 kids...
I don't want a sex partner,
A female friend or buddy
To be played with like silly puddy.*

This sounds like the family dream of the Moral Majority. What makes it seem even more like the ideology of Middle America is the

album's critical stereotype of the ghetto as a place of boozing, sexual promiscuity, and idleness. Its hit track "Tennessee" idolizes "the country" of Tennessee as "home" — as a place not only of family roots but a promised land of divine "enlightenment" where one can "understand [God's] plan." In contrast, the ghetto is blamed for perpetuating African-American bondage and misery.

*Now I see the importance of history,
Why my people be in the mess they be.
Many Journeys to freedom made in vain
By brothers on the corner playin'
Ghetto games.*

The album's other most popular track, "People Everyday" makes the same sort of damning contrast, this time drawn between "the African" and "the Nigga." It tells the story of a peaceful, country-loving African couple (enjoying music "in the park," not on the street and not too loud but "just loud enough so folks could hear its hype") who are bothered by a group of nasty "Niggas," clearly representing the worst ghetto stereotypes of drink, violence, and sexist disrespect.

*A group of brothers started buggin out.
Drinkin the 40 oz.
Goin' the Nigga Route!
Disrespecting my black Queen
Holding their crotches and being obscene.*

When one of these brothers actually touches this queen, he ends up getting "stomped by an African" (the narrating rapper hero) for "acting like a Nigga."

Sexism and violent disrespect for "bitches" is one of the hardest things for us progressive rap advocates to accept. For women certainly belong to the many groups that have suffered the oppression of the Man. One welcome feature in Arrested Development's advocacy of family values is the highly respected role it gives to women through the family. We saw this in the defense of Speech's black queen. But was her honor protected simply because she is his Queen, that is, part of his immediate family? Would he do the same for any black sister? How far do family values extend? Who belongs to the family, and how do we care for those who are outside of it?

Concentrating on family values often means worrying about the welfare and prosperity

of our own little nuclear family and perhaps of other good families like ours, while not caring for others who have not had the good fortune or the desire to be in such a family. Thus, in American politics, the ideology of family values has been used to hide smug contempt and selfish disregard for those in our society whose lives do not meet family-value standards — the homeless, the jobless, and those whose families are "broken" or abnormal by mainstream standards. Even if families are a good thing, this conservative family-value ideology is a grave danger for the political mission of rap. But how does Arrested Development avoid it?

First, they distance themselves from mainstream America by attacking the establishment for its oppression and by advocating revolution. An entire song is dedicated to "Raining Revolution" where Speech urges, "Let it Rain, Let it Rain." In the very next song, "Give a Man a Fish," he continues: "This system has gotten the best of me" and other brothers, so we "got to get political."

*Political I gotta get
Grown but can't hold my own
So this government needs to be overthrown.*

Talking revolution and dissin' the system in this general way is hip but not so helpful. Specific targets need to be identified. One target Speech zaps (in "Fishin' 4 Religion") is the baptist



church which is attacked for complicity with the government in keeping its people in chains. For it teaches us to "cope" with injustice and misery rather than curing these evils through radical "change."

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Chuck "D" (Continued)

"Well, I'm going to try to go back to the hood and employ some people" or "I'm going to try to go back to the hood and build a business."

Then we must have control of the educational curriculum. Even if you went to a black college, you didn't go to a black high school or a black elementary school, so you are missing a foundation, and that curriculum could teach us how to build family, redefine the black man and take the side of the black woman. It could teach us all the things that we need.

Number three, we have to be able to make and enforce our own laws. The black man has got to be able to say, OK, we got those two structures, now we make our own laws, which means, no, you cannot jail our youth. Let us deal with our youth. You know what I'm saying? Let us take our youth and rehabilitate his mind so he can come back out into the real world and deal with it rather than going into a holding cell or country club and then coming back out in the wilderness and being tricked, you know what I'm saying? Those are things that have to happen. I mean, I'm here in the public eye for a little bit of time, and the thing is that the media will try to make it look like increasingly I am a joke, even to the black youth. They will try to make, by 1996 or 1997 I predict, I will be a joke just talking all that black shit? Like I say, it wouldn't be called a struggle if it wasn't, you know what I'm saying, so I'm struggling. There is no such thing as a black success story. So we don't have a black community. We are living on plantations and many of us think we actually have a black community. So that is where we go wrong. I mean, because, athletes and artists are lost, so how the hell can community be found and shit? People looking at role models on TV that ain't even got their shit together. And you know, one thing I refuse to do, I refuse to publicly criticize Black people, I refuse to get on these talk shows on TV where they get 5 or 6 people with different philosophies but talking the same thing and they're arguing amongst each other. Whether I sell a million records won't matter because I'm going to be like a termite inside the wood of the music business. My job is to make little dobermans, you know what I'm saying, that's goin to be even worse. My job is to make vipers, you know what I'm saying, whether it's like

running up to maybe somebody like Lords of the Underground, like, get your business together, get your structure together, or running into Naughty and telling them to take care of their merchandise or running into fellow peers like Ice T and say "Yo, let's put this TV program together."

Rich Shusterman (Continued)

*The word cope and the word change
Is directly opposite. Not the same.
She should have been praying to change her woes.
But pastor said pray to cope with those.
The government is happy with most baptist churches
Cuz they don't do a damn thing to try to nurture
Brothers and sisters in the revolution.
Baptist teaches dying is the only solution
Passiveness causes others to pass us by.*

But more important and original than this attack on institutional Christianity (an attack shared by hard-core ghetto rappers like KRS-One), we find in this album also positive targets in the revolutionary struggle. These targets are not for dissin' but for caring, and they need special care because mainstream society has so mercilessly dissed and dismissed them. Two objects of care are specifically identified: single mothers and their babies on the one hand, and the unemployed homeless, on the other. Each of these socially deprecated and neglected groups is given the attention of an entire song that aims to defend their dignity and to inspire in the album's audience a new sense of their human worth. It is this deep concern for society's "irregulars," its victims and outsiders that saves the family-value ideology of Arrested Development from the worst kind of uncaring conservatism.

This concern is what vindicates Speech as speaking for "the outcast tribe" and not the mainstream Moral Majority. "Mama's always on Stage," offers help and respect to the single mother and her children, linking this humane effort and the humans it aids to the cause of revolution.

*We'll be there just give us a ring
We will help U to raise that king
Word to the mother, cause it's a black thang.
I respect you in a strong way. ...
Brothers talkin' revolution but leave
their babies behind*

*Well sister he's a sucker just leav'em be
 The revolution is up to brothers like me
 To step in cuz yo man stepped out
 The goal to raise these children, no doubt....
 Can't be a revolution without women.
 Can't be a revolution without children.*

The same message of respect and solidarity is expressed, in the song "Mr. Wendel," toward the homeless poor who have to beg for food and whom society treats as outside the family of families, as nameless nobodies. "No one ever knew his name cuz he's a no one." But Speech learns to appreciate the human worth and knowledge of Mr. Wendel, and thus does not see himself as merely giving the man charity. "Now that I know 'em to give him money isn't charity. He gives me some knowledge, I buy him some food." And Mr. Wendel's knowledge is valuable, because it too is linked to revolution through its implicit critique of our ruthlessly competitive and wasteful society. He may be homeless but at least he is:

*Free to be without the worries of a quick to diss society.
 For Mr. Wendel's a bum. ...
 Uncivilized we call him,
 But I just saw him eat off the food we waste
 Civilization, are we really civilized?
 I feed you dignity to stand with pride, realize
 That all in all you stand tall
 Go head, Mr. Wendel.*

In such compassion and respect for the victims of society, Arrested Development redeems itself and rap as a positive caring social force. It therefore deserves its success in the wide American public, and I hope America gets its message which offers a fine dialectical synthesis for reforming society. The old family-values ideology of middle America has perpetuated misery and bondage for those who could not meet its rigid standards. As a necessary negative reaction, hip hop championed its own oppositional values, its allegiance not to the nuclear family but to the ghetto and its culture. It celebrated not family values but homeboy values. The genius of Arrested Development is that it tries to synthesize the best of these rival value schemes and mix them into a new composition that we could call homey-family values. This is ambitious sampling worthy of the rap tradition, and I hope that not only the hip hop nation but the American public can dance to the mix.

RICHARD (RICH FROSTED) SHUSTERMAN is professor of philosophy at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and author of *PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS* (1992), which provides a philosophical study of rap. Dr. Shusterman, a Philadelphia native, was educated in Israel (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) and received his doctorate at Oxford University. He is also the author of *T.S. ELIOT AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF CRITICISM* and *THE OBJECT OF LITERARY CRITICISM*.

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