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FAU symposium to tackle hip-hop's influence on politics, social change

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Love it or dis' it, rap music is here to stay, and so is hip-hop, the cultural force that surrounds it. After a quarter-century, the music and its image have become a monster phenomenon, one that crosses racial, ethnic and socio-economic boundaries, influencing the clothes people wear, the entertainment they seek and the language they speak.

Rap music is now popular music, and hip-hop is a $10 billion industry with its influence evident everywhere. Hang outside a movie theater and chances are you'll see young people sporting Sean John shirts (from rapper P. Diddy's clothing line), boasting their "bling bling," (shiny jewelry) and waiting to see Hitch, the country's No. 1 movie, starring Will Smith, who began his career as a rapper.

Now rap's reach touches academia, with universities offering classes about rap music and hip-hop culture." It's a big part of campus culture, huge," said Reginald Jolly, music director of the online music channel at Florida Atlantic University. "A lot of clubs on campus have functions and fund-raisers that are for the hip-hop crowd. So many people here listen to it." FAU's first Hip-Hop Symposium will be conducted Saturday, with visiting professors and students discussing how rap relates to politics, black liberation, violence and social change.

Yet despite its popularity, the musical genre that has empowered countless youth and enraged adults over the last 25 years, always seems to get a bad rap. Rap was born in the South Bronx in the `70s as dance-party music with spoken lyrics improvised over a series of beats in the African storytelling tradition. Hip-hop -- the break-dancing, graffiti and DJ'ing that became associated with rap -- was born in the mid-1970s when DJ Kool Herc began throwing block parties in the Bronx and experimenting with the new music and twin turntables. In the 1980s and early `90s, rap infused political messages and stressed social consciousness, delving into African Americans' struggle for equality. Then came "gangsta rap," a sonic barrage, which emphasized guns, drugs and fearlessness in the ghetto.

"Rap has always been controversial, with a long history of violence that has obscured the more positive messages," said Richard Shusterman, a philosopher and FAU professor who has written essays about rap. These days, more of the music is about excess -- in fortune, in sex and in hit records -- but rap never has shaken its reputation as a misogynistic and violent form of music. Some say the labels are unmerited. "There's also been a long and honorable tradition of songs urging people to stop the violence," Shusterman said, "but those don't get the play time. "Both the media and record companies have been blamed for spotlighting only certain kinds of rap -- "gangsta" rap or glamour-rap -- and contributing to a limited view of the music, both rappers and scholars say. For some, it's a circumstance as old as rap itself.

"Being that it is an urban art form that came from the streets, it's always going to get looked at with a suspicious eye and have a stigma attached to it," said New York-based rapper, Cormega, a former Def Jam recording artist who now runs his own label and recently released his critically-praised album The Testament. "It is just one of those injustices that is always going to be there." Sujatha Fernandes, a lecturer at Princeton University who focuses on rap and political expression in a global context and a speaker at Saturday's symposium, said studying rap and hip-hop opens a window into the younger generation that's been raised outside the social stability of the `50s and early `60s, in a world riddled with poverty and violence."People think that hip-hop perpetuates violence, but it really reflects many aspects of the culture," Fernandes said. "What I have a problem with is critics that see hip-hop as the sole deliverer of misogynistic messages, instead of looking at all of the other spheres where sexism does exist."

Rap is not the deliverer of all evils or the first to portray them, others said. "Rap doesn't have the monopoly on the aesthetic presentation of violence. Movies and TV are filled with it and there's always been an

artistic representation of it, from early plays like Oedipus and King Lear to the depiction of Christ's crucifixion, which are all over art," Shusterman said.

For universities such as FAU, recognizing the importance of rap and hip-hop gives the music and the culture added credibility.” I think it shows that rap is finally getting the respect and attention it deserves," Cormega said. It also creates exposure for those artists who rhyme to their own beat, rapping for a greater cause despite the lack of radio play and media attention.” There are all different kinds of rap artists out there. We're living proof," said Posdnuos of De La Soul, the eclectic and alternative hip-hop trio which made a name for itself in the late `80s and still is touring.” There’s also rappers like Common, Mos Def and Goodie Mob that have something important to say.
"If you study rap, you learn the history of it and how it enriches people's lives. Just through the words, rappers are going through therapy, talking about their lives and their experiences," Posdnuos said.

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