

Book Review: Total Chaos



Hip-Hop's transformation from an organic folk culture bred in the Bronx with roots in Afro-diasporic cultural practices into a commercially-successful zeitgeist of cool has put a lot of the artform's core values at stake. After 30 years of popping, scratching, emceeing, tagging, Phat Farm, Def Jam, BET and The Source questions of hip-hop's death, authenticity and its ability to empower future hip-hop heads are some of the concerns addressed in Total Chaos. Veteran hip-hop journalist Jeff Chang who's *Cant Stop Wont Stop* history of hip-hop earned him the Deems Taylor award last year assembled various practitioners to tease out these arguments about the past/present/future of hip-hop. Understanding the cultural rhythm of hip-hop by dissecting its creed seems to be the adventure of hip-hoppers 30 and over. The fans who lack the intimate knowledge of the Golden Era and before don't gripe as much about the various turns corporate politics has created in the mainstream distributions of the music. Some argue that times have changed and the old guards of the art need to accept the new voices and their values which reflect contemporary times. Nas's declaration that hip-hop is dead has stirred this conversation both ways and it situates the concerns of Chang's book which hopes to dismantle hip-hop's canon from the inside. Chang's interview with Tim'm West and Juba Kalamka tramples the official idea that hip-hop is heterosexual art. The two founders of the Bay Area homohop group Deep Dick Collective address the invisible queer history of hip-hop by their presence and discussion of downlow boys in the cipher and gay visual pioneers Keith Haring and Jean Michael Basquiat. Long before the praises of hypermasculinity hip-hop heads and house music lovers shared the same dance floor but openly gay emcees are still new to the mainstream. You can "hear" the chip on their shoulders obviously coming from the irony that hip-hop was a response from the powerless to take power and by the early '90s the artform was mimicking its original oppressor.

Accomplished graffiti writers Cey Adams and Brent Rollins argue that the same big company attitude that has enveloped hip-hop has caused its commercial art direction to suffer as well. From spray-painting trains to pen and pixel images and

the popularity of professional photo-editing software Photoshop, hip-hop's visuals have been cheapened. Snoop's Doggystyle is cited as the best example of poor illustration thanks to nepotism (his cousin did it) and Public Enemy's Fear Of A Black Planet's superior visuals and sales captured the awe of record companies, fans and fellow artists. As much as the computer is derided for making lesser quality optical outings cheesiness has always had its place in hip-hop one specific example being the Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince second album cover. The usual issue of misogyny in gangsta rap is traced to its roots in American stereotypes about Black women by Joan Morgan and Mark Anthony Neal. They compare notes from racist ideologies of the red-hot mamas to the words and actions of male rappers and journalists. Morgan's previously unknown admission that Mike Tyson's rape trial was handled by tax lawyers who cast him as a small-brained big phallus-carrying animal explains why hip-hoppers of both genders need to leave the hypermasculinity and hoedom alone. By the end of the book Chang successfully travels over several mini histories of hip-hop that answers Nas's decalaration with proof of hip-hop's life in crisis not death. KRS-One said that Nas's stance was more of a warning than a definitive casket-closing. These essays within the anthology stake out problem areas in the music and culture that can be healed and force hip-hop to turn on its head and reclaim its insurgent but fun spirit.