WHAT WAS THE HIPSTER?

participants? I just can’t tell if queer culture overlaps with hipster culture. But I would be depressed if it didn’t.

HIP-HOP & HIPSTERISM

Notes on a Philosophy of Us & Them

There is a difference . . . between Norman and myself in that I think he still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose. Or, perhaps I ought to put it another way: the things that most white people imagine that they can salvage from the storm of life is really, in sum, their innocence. It was this commodity precisely which I had to get rid of at once, literally, on pain of death.

— James Baldwin

The quotation comes from James Baldwin’s “love letter” to Norman Mailer, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” published in Esquire four years after Mailer’s “The White Negro” first appeared in Dissent in 1957. If the n+1 panel is an update of
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Mailer's attempt to define the hipster, then consider my response an update of Baldwin's dismissive, but gracious, riposte.

The hipster strikes me as an avatar of innocence. No one self-identifies as a hipster. Baldwin's point was to suggest that an essay on the White Negro—alogous, I'd argue, to a panel on hipsters—is the indulgence of a dream, a fantasy, that arises from the luxury of sleeping through life. (Nietzsche's first maxim in Twilight of the Idols: "Idleness is the beginning of all psychology.") And Baldwin's sentiment cuts right to the heart of what white privilege in America is about: the artful shirking of human responsibility in the face of ongoing injustice; a certain entitled pacifism that preserves the status quo of Us and Them. They say the issue of class is about the Haves and the Have Nots, but that's only a small remove from the conversation of Us and Them. And the hipster discussion, much like Mailer's "White Negro" essay, is a different kind of discussion: one about Us and Them, carried on almost entirely among those who Have.

AFTER RECEIVING THE transcript of the n+1 panel, I talked about contemporary hipsters with: my father (55, black); two of my good guy friends (37 and 30, black); my girlfriend's mom (57, Puerto Rican); my girlfriend's dad (age indeterminate, Italian); my girlfriend's sister (thirtysomething, Itali-Rican), and a smattering of others who would fit under the rubric of "peers." No one apart from those who read my blog (often for reasons of personal loyalty) demonstrated any real familiarity with the term. Which is to say, besides with folks who might have gone to the panel, there wasn't a conversation to be had. No one was too taken with the concept after I spelled out the relevant details, either. "You mean young people?" was a common response. Glazed eyes was another.

I grew up in the South Bronx in the '80s, and in the mid-'90s was plucked from there and escorted to boarding school in pastoral Connecticut (Choate Rosemary Hall, Pomfret). In my years at school, and subsequently at college (Trinity, in Hartford), I never once heard the term "hipster." Looking back, I think hipsters, yuppies, and preppies were the same thing to a black person in my position. We didn't classify people beyond the fundamentals of race, money, and maybe social skills. A friend might have referred to what others would call a "hipster" as "rich white awkward dude," or maybe "white, rich, skinny-pants-wearing motherfucker, but he's cool though." I can't say that this doesn't feel—in my experience anyway—more semantically rich and more to the point. Which makes me think that the term "hipster" functions within a world of small distinctions where people don't want to name the facts, and that it has some sort of repressed white-American sensibility in its essence. (I
remember reading n+1’s opening manifesto: “Say what you mean!”

In 2010, in contemporary hip-hop culture, it’s actually a bit of a surprise that there isn’t much “hipster” talk thrown around. Drake used a line in his So Far Gone mixtape, “me doing shows getting everyone nervous, cause them hipsters gonna have to get along with them hood niggas” — but there “hipster” was just used to signify the artist’s wide-ranging pop appeal. In the context of rapping, it’s more an aesthetic flourish and boast than a substantive commentary. “These preppies gonna have to get along with these thugs” would have been the line a few years ago.

It’s been used as an insult on occasion, certainly. The panel points out that one of the odd distinctions about the term “hipster” was that even at the peak of its significance, no group claimed it for itself. Well, if you thought hipsters didn’t like hipsters, hip-hop really didn’t like hipsters; the few times I heard of the label getting slung at people in the hip-hop community, the pejorative quality was only multiplied. In June 2008, XXL magazine published a piece re-examining so-called “Hipster Rap” and defending rappers who had been identified as hipsters for not exhibiting certain hip-hop tropes.* A true hipster rapper

THE VENOMOUS MONIKER "hipster rap" can be distinguished from another coinage I've been working on: the "Blipster," or black hipster. With the Blipster, we're talking more about personal fashion and individual hobby interests. After all, hipsters are allowed to be any ethnicity—you can be a white skinny-pants wearing person, or you can be a black skinny-pants wearing person. You might be mocked by friends, sure, as any weird clothing might get you mocked—but it's not as insidious a crime in the black community as being a hipster rapper. In my view, the Blipster is a contemporary update on the cool black nerd, picking stuff up from white subculture to develop an accepted type. These skinny, nappy-facial-haired black dudes might even be avatars of our ethnocultural future.

The outcome is a group like Ninjasonik that wears Blipster fashion and makes hip-hop/techno-punk music. They have a song called "Tight Pants," featuring a hook that goes: "I'm a tight-pants-wearing-ass nigga," over and over again, and a song using Tracy Morgan's infamous "Somebody's gonna get pregnant" line. Both suggest the hipster signifiers of irony, distance, and detachment are just starting to emerge for hip-hop artists who can actually embrace it. If hipsters represent some sort of cultural exhaustion, then Ninjasonik indicates that once black people have enough middle-class traction, a certain bourgeois comfort level, then, and only then, will the hipster bogeyman raise his head for them, too, as a sort of cultural scarecrow. In time, every culture gets its hipster.

And yet, this interpretation only sticks if we ignore the legacy of hip-hop, and the fundamental vein of irony and comedy it's kept close to its heart. Prince Paul, on his Psychoanalysis: What Is It? and his hip-hop opera A Prince Among Thieves, and De La Soul, on their 3 Feet High and Rising and De La Soul is Dead, pretty much invented the "hip-hop sketch" as a form of urban avant-garde satire. Other quirky comic artists that predated the contemporary hip-hop explosion are Dana Dane ("Nightmares"), Biz Markie ("Pickin' Boogers"), Slick Rick ("Lick the Balls"), and another one you might have heard of, Will Smith, the first hip-hop Grammy award winner. These guys were storytellers, with self-conscious, even meta lyrics, always subversive of the tough-talk of so-called "gangsta rap" as well as the militant politics of so-called "conscious rap." There was a certain innocence in the consciousness of a lot of early hip-hop, an innocence that finds echoes in our vision of the hipster today.

A BLACK BOY looking at white boys, hipsterism strikes me as what happens when white folks become aware of power and inequity—but then say, "Well, what are we supposed to do? Throw our
hands up and mug for the camera." Any relinquishing of power is inevitably an aesthetic gesture.

Young people who grew up during the hip-hop explosion saw it empower black people, but also saw it enter the same system of commercial exploitation that created preppies, yuppies, and all the rest. If hip-hop learned by watching white America, then maybe the new young white America said — in its best and only attempt to try and help correct things — “Look, we’re going to make ourselves so silly, so pathetically empty, that you have to get back to the roots of what you believe and want, and in turn, help us get back to the roots of what we believe and want.” And what we all want is to find the means of turning a philosophy of Us and Them into simply Us.

Hip-hop allows for the same conversation, one about Us and Them, but also steers toward more substance, content, real people, and real issues of inequity and injustice. I mean to say: if you’re talking about hipsters and want to get somewhere, you might be better off just talking hip-hop. To more directly get to the point. To make your words and ideas more actionable. To skip indulging in intellectual exercises like the “White Negro,” and go the more difficult route: learning hip-hop codes and sensibilities, because it’s a culture, not a shell or an aesthetic. It has depth. If both hipsterism and hip-hop are doors to move all of us on to a shared place, hip-hop is the one that isn’t revolving, returning you to where you started.