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psychiatry in music

Hip-hop and psychiatry: a fair rap?

Thomas James Reilly

The link between rap and mental health is the promotion of harmful, self-destructive behaviour. The issue of drugs has been central to the gangster rap phenomenon. Alcohol abuse and casual sex are similarly ubiquitous in modern rap. Arguably, however, it is not much different from other musical styles such as rock or dance. The morals of hip-hop cannot be readily separated from the morals of the music industry.

Gangster rap's machismo is personified in Notorious B.I.G. who claimed to only know about 'money, hoes and clothes'. Behind the bravado though, he delivered insightful reflections on a great deal more. Biggie is a prime example of rap's ability to express mental vulnerability in an otherwise hyper-masculine culture. On the track *Suicidal Thoughts* he contemplates slitting his wrists and the real person behind the thug caricature is unveiled.

Hip-hop duo Gang Starr were among a group of artists keen to expose gangster rap clichés. Their 1998 hit *Moment of Truth* centres on reaching a nadir, deciding whether to live or die:

I'm ready to lose my mind but instead I use my mind/
I put down my knife and take the bullets out my nine.

These hip-hop luminaries are not ashamed to rap about suicide. Instead, they try to highlight that it takes strength to admit and overcome thoughts of self-harm.

British hip-hop has a similar image. Dizzee Rascal's debut *Boy in Da Corner* has all the usual hip-hop touchstones of sex, violence and drugs. The closing track *Do it*, though, is a personal admission of Dizzee's own depression:

Some days I wake up wishing I could sleep for good/
And if I had the guts to end it all believe I would . . .
If you wanna get through it, stretch your mind to the limit/
You can do it.

Here, suicide is not a cowardly act but more akin to the Greco-Roman ideal of an honourable death, a death which takes courage. Nevertheless, he goes on to encourage listeners to find their own strength in overcoming mental difficulties. The message from hip-hop is that it is normal to feel depressed and it is not necessarily an admission of weakness.