Pop Music and the Spatialization of Race in the 1990s

by Mark Anthony Neal

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In September 1990, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* debuted on NBC. The show starred Will Smith, also known as the Fresh Prince, of the rap duo DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, portraying a character, “Will Smith,” who relocates from a working-class community in Philadelphia to live with wealthy relatives in Bel Air. The series was loosely based on the life of music industry executive Benny Medina and was executive produced by Quincy Jones. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* was significant for several reasons. It anticipated the emergence of recognizable rap stars as mainstream American pop icons; two decades later Smith, O'Shea Jackson (Ice Cube), James Todd Smith (LL Cool J), Dana Owens (Queen Latifah), and Tracy Marrow (Ice-T), to name just a few, are all major stars who have found success in both film and television. The series was also a broad metaphor for demographic shifts that were occurring in various American institutions. Will Smith was a cool, street-wise, mischievous black kid moving into suburban America. Such a reality was rendered comical and even innocuous as Smith’s so-called street edge undercut the stiff morality and pretensions of elite America as represented by Smith’s relatives, the Banks family.

At the time of the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*’s debut, these demographic shifts were depicted in more menacing ways in other sectors of American popular culture. “Gangsta rap,” as epitomized by the lyrics of Ice Cube, was emerging as an expression of anger and violence among black youth. In his first solo album, which came out just a few months before Fresh Prince debuted, Ice Cube rapped: “It’s time to take a trip to the suburbs . . . I think back when I was robbin my own kind | The police didn't pay it no mind | But when I start robbin the white folks | Now I’m in the pen.”[1]

Ice Cube’s lyrics captured some of the rage later associated with the violence that exploded in Los Angeles in 1992. The acquittal of four LAPD officers for the beating of unarmed motorist Rodney King became ground zero for a national debate about police brutality and racial profiling. Ice Cube's skill as a lyricist was rooted in his ability to combine both the realist sensibilities of some black art and the metaphorical expressions of a more universal message. The metaphorical aspect of his work was often obscured given the way gangsta rap was tethered to black urban violence, instead of being read as a metaphoric response to the unchecked powers of law enforcement in those communities.

Soldiers of the California Army National Guard patrol the streets of Los Angeles, April 1992. (Courtesy of the US Army Field Artillery School)
Beyond the realist view of early 1990s rap music, Ice Cube’s lyrics represent another kind of invasion, where black youth culture—this again is where The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air resonates—inves the airwaves, strip malls, and bedroom walls of suburban America. For young rap artists of the era, it was a recognition of the commercial possibilities of rap music beyond its traditional listener and consumer demographic. This, of course, was not a new narrative in mainstream commercial appeal; black rhythm-and-blues artists in the 1950s such as Little Richard, Ray Charles, Ruth Brown, and Sam Cooke all experienced great popularity among mainstream audiences. A few, like Charles, were able to sustain that popularity over the full course of their careers. So cognizant was Motown founder Berry Gordy of the crossover possibilities of black artists in the 1960s that he famously described the label’s music as “The Sound of Young America” to make explicit his desire to break down racial boundaries in popular music. Even rap music experienced such moments, notably when the genre’s signature group in the 1980s, Run-DMC, crossed over to young white audiences with a calculated collaboration with the rock group Aerosmith on a remake of the latter’s “Walk This Way” in 1986.

When The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air debuted and Ice Cube recorded his first solo album, two rap songs were atop the pop charts: MC Hammer’s “Can’t Touch This,” which sampled Rick James’s funk classic “Super Freak” (1980), and Vanilla Ice’s “Ice, Ice Baby,” which sampled Queen and David Bowie’s “Under Pressure” (1981). Both Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer were subject to push back from more traditional rap music fans who considered their music to be too commercial. The fact that Vanilla Ice (Rob Van Winkle) was white was of some significance, but other white rappers, like the Beastie Boys and Third Base, did have credibility among hardcore rap fans. The success of the two rappers reflected much of the conventional wisdom regarding the mainstreaming of black or other forms of ethnic music; simply put, the music had to lose many of its ethnic signifiers and/or white artists had to embrace the style in order for it to truly have crossover appeal. Rock and roll of the 1950s is a classic example of this, as record labels actively sought to have white artists “cover” songs that were popular on the rhythm-and-blues charts. The early career of Elvis Presley represents such a case—his breakthrough recording “Hound Dog” was a cover of a song originally recorded by Big Mama Thornton—though there were other artists, such as Pat Boone, for whom such covers practically defined their output in the period. Some examples of black music deemed more “authentic” (to use a troublesome word) did break through to the mainstream, but from the 1950s until the early 1990s, music label practices clearly suggested that black music and artists needed to be packaged in a certain way to reach broader audiences.[2]

The emergence of hip-hop as a mainstream pop music in the 1990s represented a shift in the traditional logic of crossover. Rather than hip-hop needing to be softened, the mainstream audience instead crossed over to what was deemed authentic, un-distilled, unmediated forms of contemporary black urban music. As cultural theorist Todd Boyd writes, “in the past this popularity would have been a sure sign of accommodation, as the music would have to be compromised in some major way in order to be made mainstream. Gangsta rap has come to prominence because of its unwillingness to do so.”[3] Boyd cites myriad reasons for the shift, notably that the “music and culture industries have found ways to sell this extreme nonconformity, while many rappers have successfully packaged their mediated rage for a mass audience.”[4] Much like in previous eras, black music embodies a narrative of rebellion for American youth. As Boyd notes, “gangsta rap provides a vehicle for cathartic expression well beyond an exclusively Black space.”[5]

One measure of this shift can be found in the Billboard Hot 100 charts, which represent some of the best evidence of the popularity of black urban music, though as an index of “white flight” to black music, such evidence challenges long-held assumptions about the spatialization of race. Broadly conceived, the urban and the suburban have become keywords for where and how race is lived, as
the two spaces are stand-ins for black and white residential space. The representations are, of course, much more complicated; the “inner city,” “ghetto” (to use a dated term), and “the hood” (to use a hip-hop-generation colloquialism) represent a sub-set of the urban that is even more distinctly marked as black. Suburban, on the other hand, is not interchangeable with rural, though the two terms represent class(ed) divisions within white space, where the working-class nature of the rural is largely obscured by the presumed impoverishment of black urban space. In this way the white poor/working class largely disappears in the popular imagination, while the rural is mistakenly believed to be homogeneously “white,” as opposed to multiethnic and multiracial. The Billboard Hot 100 was one site where these distinctions about space were consistently undermined.

The Hot 100 charts for 1990 are instructive in examining musical trends that would have a dramatic impact on not just black urban music(s), but pop music in general. The charts capture the volatility of musical taste, as demonstrated in the year-end Hot 100, specifically focusing on the twenty most popular singles. The trio Bell Biv DeVoe (BBD) charted twice in the year-end Hot 100 for 1990, with their single “Poison” at No. 4 and “Do Me” at No. 11. The group was an off-shoot of the popular R&B boy band New Edition, which was founded in the early 1980s. With lead singers Bobby Brown, Ralph Tresvant, and Johnny Gill leaving to pursue solo careers, the remaining members Ricky Bell, Michael Bivins, and Ronnie DeVoe decided to release a project, Poison (1990), to embrace a harder hip-hop edge that was largely missing from their work with New Edition.

What Bell Biv DeVoe termed “Hip-hop Smoothed Out on an R&B Tip with a Pop Appeal . . . to It,”[6] would eventually sell more than four million copies. What is notable about the group’s success is that their interpretation of their sound would largely become the template for mainstream pop music success well into the future, beginning with the emergence of boy bands such as the Backstreet Boys and ’N Sync in the mid-1990s. The global successes of Justin Timberlake (formerly of ’N Sync), Usher, and Beyonce, for example, were all based on the musical combination forwarded by Bell Biv DeVoe in 1990. The power of that musical narrative can also be witnessed in the career arc of vocalist Mariah Carey—the best-selling female artist of the 1990s. She released her first single, “Visions of Love,” (a traditional pop ballad that went multi-platinum) in 1990. By the mid-nineties she had begun to collaborate with hip-hop and R&B artists. Notably, Carey’s own identity during the 1990s transitioned from “white” to multiracial during that period.

Bell Biv DeVoe’s success in 1990 is significant because it occurred under an older model of chart reporting, largely based on the reports of airplay and data from music-selling chains (at the expense of the kinds of mom-and-pop stores where black music was traditionally sold). That system of reporting would change in the spring of 1991 when Billboard began to use the Nielsen Soundscan system for their charts. Soundscan’s technology reported record sales at the points of purchase, providing a more realistic real-time reporting process. Regardless of the changes in reporting, Vanilla Ice’s To the Extreme, MC Hammer’s Please Hammer Don’t Hurt ’Em, and LL Cool J’s Mama Said Knock You Out would still have found the success they did in 1991 as all three artists were seen widely on MTV. The same cannot be said for N.W.A., who appeared on the Hot 100 album charts on June 15, 1991, in the No. 2 position and stayed in the top ten for seven weeks. Despite receiving limited exposure, N.W.A.’s triumph had a seismic impact on the recording industry, as their album found an audience without the benefit of significant airplay (radio or music video) or significant promotional efforts, both of which were bottom-line issues for record label executives. Labels rushed to reproduce the formula, with a particular focus on artists who could be packaged around gangsta rap. Recording companies would eventually have to retreat from their investment (or rather lack of investment) in gangsta rap, however, as the genre became part of a larger political narrative about the rise of violence in American cities (in a decade in which crime rates actually dropped) and the desire to increase investment in the carceral state.
The success of gangsta rap during this period was assumed to be based largely on its popularity among white consumers. By the mid-1990s, it was a strongly held belief that 70 percent of all hip-hop sales were made by white consumers. That belief was the direct result of the new Soundscan reporting and the presumption that sales in the suburbs naturally correlated with the largely white populations of those communities. Such thinking did not take into account black middle-class flight to the suburbs. Nor did it recognize the fact that black youth had access to transportation to suburban malls, particularly as the mom-and-pop shops that traditionally served black urban America were being put out of business by the very chain stores found in those malls. While there is no question that young white consumers had crossed over to certain forms of black urban music, the 70 percent figure undervalued the buying power of black audiences and also obscured other forms of consumption and transfer, such as bootlegging and recording radio broadcasts onto cassette tapes.[7]

These perceptions, of course, cut both ways. In his 1989 essay on the “New Black Aesthetic,” writer Trey Ellis provides context for what he describes as a generation of “cultural mulattoes”: Black youth who grow up in suburban America and move back and forth between “black” and “white” cultures.[8] The same cultural dynamics that led white youth to consume black urban music also led black youth to consume white suburban music. Putting the groups N.W.A. and Nirvana, for example, on opposite ends of a scale presumes a cultural, or racial, gulf for which there is largely only anecdotal and symbolic evidence. Given the accessibility of mainstream media, there’s no reason to think that black youth in 1991 were not just as interested in Nirvana’s Top 10 rock hit “Smells Like Teen Spirit” as suburban white kids were in gangsta rap. Indeed a generation later, 30-something black jazz pianist Robert Glaspar, who has made a career out of bridging the gap between traditional jazz and hip-hop audiences, covered Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” on a recent recording, not so ironically titled Black Radio. Glaspar’s point is that he was inspired by a wide range of musical styles while growing up in Houston, Texas, and that the music industries need to recognize how expansive the influences are for many artists.

In the summer of 1992, Seattle rapper Sir Mix-O-Lot topped the Billboard Hot 100 for five weeks with his novelty song “Baby Got Back.” Following a strategy charted by MC Hammer, Vanilla Ice, and others, Sir Mix-O-Lot found the right combination of a catchy dance groove and rather innocuous lyrics. “Baby Got Back,” which samples Channel One’s “Technicolor” (written and produced by Detroit Techno legend Juan Atkins), received the 1993 Grammy Award for Best Rap Solo Performance and was Sir Mix-O-Lot’s only hit record. The song would have been best remembered as a classic example of a “one-hit wonder,” until it was resurrected (minus some offensive lyrics) in the summer of 2005 as part of a back-to-school campaign for Target. Though the commercial gained some notoriety, in large part because of those who remembered its racy lyrics, there was little commentary on the fact that a thirteen-year-old rap song had been reconstituted for one of the nation’s most trusted retailers. In many ways it was par for the course; two years earlier on the Billboard Hot 100 for the week ending October 11, 2003, the top ten songs were all recorded by black acts; nine of the ten could be classified as rap acts. Rather than an acknowledgement that black urban taste had somehow conquered the mainstream, the chart was more likely a product of the fact that a generation of Americans no longer viewed music as an extension of the kinds of racially segregated spaces experienced by generations before them.

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