

From Elvis to Eminem

Play that Funky Music, White Boy!

Todd Boyd

Shame on a nigga who try to run game on a nigga!

—Wu Tang Clan

I wonder how many people in the viewing audience at the 2000 Academy Awards presentation recognized the look on Denzel Washington's face when Kevin Spacey jacked him for his Best Actor Oscar. I did. And I'm sure that many of the Black people who had tuned in that evening specifically for the purpose of seeing Denzel "get his," as it were, saw the same thing. Some hip White people saw it, too.

Washington would have been justified had his reaction fit in with the proverbial "angry Black man" motif, but instead he simply flashed a quick tight-lipped smile and applauded sparingly, as if to say, "It's all good." But the look itself spoke volumes. We could see it. We could feel it. We know it all too well.

Denzel was certainly not the first Black person to get jacked for his award, and, rest assured, he won't be the last. I am reminded of a similar story about Duke Ellington, when

he was denied the Pulitzer Prize in music back in 1966. It was more than obvious to everyone that not only did he deserve the lousy prize, he deserved sainthood. But upon his rejection, Duke—so classy, so elegant—simply said, "I guess they don't want me to become too famous at such an early age." He was in his late sixties at the time.

Well, if Duke got jacked, then at least we can say that Denzel is in good company.

Where's my goddamn trophy?!

—Willie D. of The Geto Boys, "Trophy"

Don't get me wrong. It not as though the Oscars are any objective measure of one's accomplishments. More than anything else, they are the industry's way of advertising itself, promoting its product. In the words of many a Brotha, at the end of the day, "It really ain't shit."

But, then again, maybe it is.

After all, Oscars translate to money. Oscars also translate to the so-called respect of

one's peers, and maybe more than anything else, they represent one's full membership in "the club."

The only Black man ever granted full membership to that club is the master thespian Sidney Poitier—and even that was a special dispensation due to the indirect influence of a man known as Martin Luther King. Though there have been other Black actors and actresses to get love on a supporting tip—Denzel, Hattie McDaniel, Lou Gossett Jr., Whoopi Goldberg, and Cuba Gooding Jr.—none, with the exception of Mr. Tibbs, has gained that top honor.

Some may remember the comments Eddie Murphy made before he handed out the Oscar for Best Picture back in 1988. He said that considering the rather long time between Blacks winning Oscars—there was about a twenty-five-year gap between successive winners—maybe he was on stage too soon. I understand that Cher was a bit peeved that Murphy took the spotlight on the occasion of her glory (for the film *Moonstruck*), using it to "play the race card." I also understand that Murphy couldn't care less.

Since the mid-nineties spectacle known as the O. J. Simpson trial, we have heard over and over again about people "playing the race card," as if race were a game, and one could choose to pursue this mere folly at one's leisure—as if we had some control, some real agency in the matter. Well, what happens when they play what I like to call the "nigga card"? I ponder this as an East Detroit 'hood rat known as Eminem reminds us that Elvis once did some jackin' of his

own. Yet, Eminem is not Elvis, nor is he trying to be. Elvis jacked Black culture when Black culture was relegated to Black people. It was underground in every sense of that word that Harriet Tubman helped make famous. It was dirty, grimy, and gritty. Elvis, Sam Phillips, and Colonel Tom Parker housed it and went straight to the bank. Black musicians had no choice in the matter other than to keep redefining the music and keep innovating so as to create the undisputed art form and cultural behemoth that the music is to this day.

The only thing a nigger can do for me is shine my shoes and buy my records.

—Elvis Presley

Nowadays everybody wanna talk like they got somethin' to say, but nothin' comes out when you move your lips, just a bunch of gibberish, and muthafuckas act like they forgot about Dre.

—Eminem on Dr. Dre's "Forget About Dre"

In today's world, in the world of hip-hop, White boys need entrance passes. The racially specific nature of hip-hop is indeed ghetto fabulous, and it suggests that even middle-class niggas need a ghetto pass. So a White boy can expect to either give it up or be held upside down out of a hotel window, like Big Red did homey in *The Five Heartbeats*.

We remember all too vividly Vanilla Ice, a charlatan if ever there was one. Vanilla Ice was associated with MC Hammer and, not surprising, neither of them is around any-

more, except maybe as subjects on VH1's *Behind the Music*. Neither had street credibility, that most essential ingredient needed for true hip-hop acceptance.

Eminem's relationship with Dr. Dre is of central importance here, because it is Dre who extended Marshall Mathers a ghetto pass when he had no other way of gaining entrance. Elvis's rumored comments quoted above suggest that he lived in a time when there was nothing Black people had that was of any use to him—except their music, of course. In other words, Eminem comes along at a time when the authenticity of the Black experience is assumed, especially as it functions in hip-hop. Which stands in the way of any potential White performer trying to tell his story.

Pops (Louis Armstrong) once said that to be successful in America as a Black man, you had to become "some White man's nigger." You needed White sponsorship. Not anymore, and definitely not in hip-hop. The story has been reversed. To the extent that America has accepted hip-hop as the authentic expression of ghetto existence, White folks need not apply.

I say all this, though, with the millennial reemergence of the White negro in full effect, as we speak. Leader of the pack, of course, is Eminem, but he has a crew, however much he might like to think of himself as a solo act. Fellow Detroit suburbanite Kid Rock has somehow managed to merge Johnny Cash with Too Short, and Fred Durst, he of Limp Bizkit fame, has even found his way to Shaolin. Not to mention cats like Jason Williams, "white chocolate" on the court, or Danny Hoch and Upski, who are putting this phenomenon to critical scrutiny, while performing its pathologies.

Even our own President Bill Clinton commented to the congressional Black Caucus, after a previous meeting with the actor Chris Tucker—who is preparing to play the first Black president in an upcoming film—that

Tucker was a little late, that indeed, he, Slick Willie, had beat him to it. When the man on high is claimin' Brothahood credentials, you know times have really changed. I have not forgotten my recent acquaintance, Warren Beatty, who put this all before us a few years ago in *Bulworth*. Can there be any question that Norman Mailer's late-fifties White negro is back on the scene with a gangsta lean?

What do we make of all this? I single Eminem out because he is the only one to have made his mark in the arena of Black culture, as opposed to appropriating Blackness and sanitizing it for White audiences like many of the others. I am often asked whether or not Eminem is like the return of Elvis. To this, I say a resounding no. Yet this answer is not something one arrives at easily. First of all, Dr. Dre, as I said, introduced Eminem to the world. Dre has not only produced many of Eminem's tracks and appeared in his videos, but he's also the owner of Aftermath records, which distributes Eminem's records. In other words, Dre is making money off of Eminem. Some have even argued that Dre is pimpin' the White boy, and that it is about time that Black people started making money off of White folks.

Eminem has not faced much opposition from the hip-hop community, either. As a matter of fact, many other rappers eagerly embrace him as a legitimate figure. They go overboard praising his lyrical skills and his overall prowess as an MC. This is not unlike the days when Larry Bird played for the Celtics and many Black NBA players would bend over backward to tell you how good the White boy could play.

When you consider that Eminem came up within the genre of hip-hop, as opposed to watching it from a distance, it underscores his effortless entry into the culture. It's not like he's Michael Bolton or someone who tried to act like his work had nothing to do with Black culture. No, Eminem bows down ac-

cordingly, often citing the work of his mentor, Dre, particularly work from Dre's NWA phase. It's obvious to me that Eminem has totally absorbed all of those early NWA and Ice Cube records, because his "I don't give a fuck" attitude, now a cliché in hip-hop, is a carbon copy of what the Brothas from Compton put down back in the day. Eminem has never tried to deny his debt to the culture.

This is not unlike the career of one Tina Marie, the White female singer who was such an integral part of Rick James's world back in the late seventies and early eighties, before the Superfreak got completely carried away. This was in a time before music videos, when people heard Tina Marie sing before ever seeing her, and most of the Black community assumed she was Black. It was certainly a shock to me when I saw her for the first time. Yet, if you ask people who were listening at the time, they will surely tell you that Tina Marie was a serious artist. She was embraced because she came up within the Black culture. I have heard many people talk the same way about "Pistol" Pete Maravich, the late White NBA star from the seventies who was unanimously praised by the Brothas in regard to his highly stylized game.

Eminem's records are selling at a rate unparalleled in hip-hop—not a small task, when you consider that this is a genre that has consistently dominated the music charts

in the past few years. His music is now being played on rock stations that never played hip-hop before. Again, there is a parallel to that phenomena known as "white chocolate," White boy Jason Williams of the Sacramento Kings, whose NBA jersey is the best-selling jersey in the league. (This for a player who is now only in his third year, and who has yet to do anything really other than dominate the nightly sports show highlights.) Like Eminem's, Williams's popularity in an otherwise Black arena represents a direct connection for White audience members should they choose to make it. But as much as we may talk about White people imitating Black culture, there's also a point at which the prevalence of Black culture is such that this imitation is unconscious. Here I would reference Donny Hoch's 1999 flick *White Boys*, which features a White character, Flip Dogg, who has so absorbed hip-hop's lifestyle lessons that he's convinced he is Blacker than most Black people. When this happens—when White audiences can feel an Eminem or a Jason Williams—is it because the middle man, or the Black man, has been cut out? White audiences no longer have to put on Black face and parade around in knowing imitation. Now they can look to one of their own, whose anger, unmitigated rage, frustration, and anxiety are all now considered legitimate, even though the people from

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whom this rage originated are still struggling to be taken seriously.

I have always found it interesting the way that Black men, when speaking among themselves, will often, if not always, refer to White men as "boys." The reduction of men to boys here speaks volumes—clearly it's an attempt to diminish the White man's masculinity. There is, of course, a reverse precedent to this, going back to when southerners publicly referred to Black men as boys. But now, again, the script is being flipped.

I am so often reminded of my boys from back in the day at the University of Florida, future pro ball players who would talk all the time about how when they got drafted by the NFL or NBA, they were going to walk right up to the man and demand, "I want what's mine!" For many of them that day came true. For some of them, it did not. What these raised eyebrows around Eminem's rocket-man-like success are all about is simply demanding some accountability for what looks on the surface to be much like the same old story, different decade.

To all concerned, I suggest, niggas might be a l'il less selfish when the cheese is spread a l'il mo equally; fo sho!