Papa Don’t Preach:

REDEFINING THE BATTLE BETWEEN YOUNG AND OLD

BY CARTER HARRIS

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Back in the day when father knew best, kids went to Bible school, and movies and their stars were made for adults, it would have been hard to imagine young people setting the cultural agenda for the weekend, much less for the country. But somewhere along the line, the young became a category, a demographic, a swelling army of tastemakers that took over the world. In the cultural marketplace, the evidence of youth dominance is greater than ever: established magazines such as *Rolling Stone* put teen pop sensation Britney Spears (half-naked) on their cover to compete with newer titles such as *VIBE* and *Maxim*; former *New Yorker* head Tina Brown cuts a deal with Miramax to launch a multi-media venture called *Talk* (with mostly 20-something editors) that she promises will "have a younger sensibility" than anything she's done before; from "Scream" to "The Beach" and beyond, hardly a movie gets made these days unless it passes the "is it cool enough for kids" litmus test; and whole networks from MTV to WB exist to cater to the whims of citizens barely old enough to vote. This is to say nothing of industries such as sports, fashion, video games, and music, which have directed billions into reaching and speaking for 16- to 34-year-old consumers who want it younger, faster, more. . .

Why is this happening? In the simplest sense, it's because there are more young people in the world than ever before and there's a lot more money floating around. "Young" sells—as is clear from "Star Wars" to "Titanic," the Spice Girls to the Backstreet Boys—and therefore advertisers, and the media outlets that increasingly depend on those advertisers, want to keep up with the dreams and desires of youth. But more than just big-time consumers, the young are also becoming primary cultural producers, and many are getting rich as they reshape the tastes of America. Twenty-somethings like Sean "Puffy" Combs are granted multimillion dollar advances to promote their hip hop product. The filmmakers behind the "Blair Witch Project" watch as their outrageously successful indie flick—largely marketed via the Internet—leads to seismic shifts in the way that Hollywood thinks about and promotes films. And numerous college dropouts start online infotainment web sites and become, thanks to the initials I-P-O, rich retirees almost overnight.

For those not making a buck off all this youth mania, and even for some who are, this isn't exactly cause for celebration. On the production side, many artists complain that they're no longer getting much attention because of the industry's hunger for anything young and cool. Actor Samuel L. Jackson, for instance, recently observed that many of his long-time thespian colleagues are having trouble finding jobs because of an influx of rappers-turned-actors. (More than a dozen hip hop artists debuted in a slew of movies last year.) And one friend of mine, a 30-something new-to-Hollywood television writer, says he's hoping no one discovers that he's about to turn 40 or he'll surely be kicked off his show. He's only half-joking.

On the consumer side, the concerns are just as serious. As one woman in her 50s put it to me, "There is less and less out there for us. I go to the store and all I see are designer fashions for skinny girls. I go to the movies and they're all pitched to kids." Michael Fields, the 59-year-old executive producer of local programming for public television station WNET in New York, says the most glaring rift between young and old is in the realm of music. "I think that the changes in music have been so extreme, everything is so accelerated,

that there's very little left out there for people like me who loved Rodgers and Hammerstein, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. There's a huge gap between the kind of stuff we like and what's available. There's never been quite the divide between generational taste as there is today."

Whether it's Bill Bennett and C. DeLores Tucker complaining about the depravity of American youth, or every third sportswriter blasting young basketball players like Iverson and Sprewell for not showing the grace and humility of their forefathers, the old and young seem to be growing further apart. It hardly helps matters when a 21-year-old White House intern with a taste for cigars nearly unseats the president of the United States and then goes on TV and giggles about it. It helps even less when kids start blowing away their classmates with automatic weapons because of, many older folks say, all that shallow-minded violent imagery they get via video games, TV and the Net.

What was once general societal irritation with those feisty younguns is turning to a mix of fascination, frustration and repulsion. This is one of the principal themes of Oliver Stone's movie "Any Given Sunday." In the film, Al Pacino's character Tony D'Amato—a member of the 'ol boys club'—finds himself fighting, via football, with the styles and sensibilities that define the new world and its young players. "I don't understand a word he's saying," D'Amato

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admits of his 20-something black quarterback Willie Beamen (Jamie Foxx). At one point, he tries to connect with his hot shot QB, sitting down next to him on a plane and striking up conversation. "What are you listening to?" D'Amato asks. "Trick Daddy," answers Beamen, plainly disturbed by the intrusion of a man he calls "Coach Stone Age" behind his back. D'Amato pretends to be familiar with the Southern rapper Trick Daddy, but he soon finds himself talking up "real musicians" like Miles Davis and John Coltrane. He offers to make a bored Beamen a tape. "I listen to CDs," says Beamen, pointing to his portable

CD player, and in effect, pointing out that the gap between them is not only one of taste in music, but a technological gap as well.

This point is echoed later when D'Amato, nursing a whiskey with his older black buddy, proclaims: "TV changed everything forever—the first time they cut away to commercial. [Up to that point] it was our concentration that mattered."

In the real world, the commercial breaks didn't just introduce marketing into the viewing equation. They introduced an interruption that eventually came to seem natural and paved the way for evermore complex interrupters like the remote control and other "interactive" elements of the computer age. No longer would it be about the simple story elements of a beginning, middle and end, but about the beginning, many middles, and a few ends, all bouncing off one another simultaneously. You have to be born to this to bear it.

What we're witnessing is the dawning of a new generation gap, one different from the era when parents worried that Elvis or those long-haired freaks would corrupt the kids. Young folk and those who cater to them aren't just tweaking the status quo, they're obliterating it. And it's happening because of changes in technology. What began with TV commercial breaks has evolved into a full-scale technology of interruption. As Mark Jacobson of *New York* magazine observed, "If there's a *Time*-mag style generation gap fomenting, it is a disparity in hand-eye coordination as much as anything of the mind or heart."

As the former executive editor of *VIBE*—a magazine with a 20-something staff that was created to serve a young, hip, multicultural audience—I am one of the beneficiaries of this shift toward youth dominance. Having spent the late 1980s absorbing and feeding off the sounds and styles of both the alternative rock and hip hop subcultures, I never imagined I'd see my sideline interests swing so mainstream.

Back in the '80s, I was a philosophy student and aspiring journalist in the Bay Area who spent much of his leisure time watching local bands and grooving to the sounds of club DJs. It was a time when academia was opening

up to new cultures and new ideas, cable was kicking into high gear with MTV, and the already-crumbling walls between entertainment and politics—not to mention the wall between East and West—finally turned to dust. During this period, hip hop music and culture became the lens through which I made sense of much of the world around me. When Reagan sent troops to Honduras during the Contra/Sandinista war in Nicaragua, I joined thousands who marched in protest to the sounds of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" (a remake of the Isley Brothers' classic). When a need for cheap rent prompted me to move to a poor black neighborhood in Oakland, it was N.W.A.'s gangsta rap song "Straight Outta Compton" that broke the ice with my young neighbors.

When I began to explore issues of aesthetics and test the theories of Barthes and Lyotard in the world at large, hip hop was there, ready to be prodded and probed for answers. Not only did rap offer new ways of using words in song and a whole new vocabulary that mystified many older and white folk, it also made use of new technologies. Post-modern this, post-modern that? I'll give you post-modern, I thought, babbling on in college papers about the ways in which a song like Gang Starr's "Words I Manifest" (1988) shattered traditional notions of modernist art. Using digital sampling—taking one part of a song and blending it into another (in this case, Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia")—DJs like Premier were deconstructing classic songs and recombining their elements into original montages.

Created in the 1970s by young black men in the South Bronx with little more than microphones and turntables, hip hop and its beats replaced rock and its guitar riffs as the primary sound in American culture. Along the way, hip hop made way for a new class of young business-minded artists and artistically minded businessmen who no longer had to play within the traditional halls of power. Even as it became corrupted in the '90s and began to reflect in its style and lyrics an almost obsessive romance with achieving the American Dream via material wealth (see Sean "Puffy" Combs), it at least wore its desires proudly on its sleeves. No hidden agenda, just buck-wild revelry in the

fact that young people of all colors would define what was worth paying attention to and Sprite, Tommy Hilfiger and Hollywood would all fall in step, trying to get a piece of the action.

If the 1920s were the "Jazz Age," as Fitzgerald said, then the '80s and '90s became the Hip Hop Age. Though the mainstream still hasn't figured out yet how to read or understand the complex poetics of say, the late The Notorious B.I.G., time is on his side: just ask anyone who's spent hours listening to the rapper simultaneously abuse and caress a groove with his baritone boom and nimble cadence.

I like the fact that in this no-brow culture of baggy pants and many standards, it simply doesn't make sense to say that Bach is better than Biggie or vice versa. But I'm also aware that the same impulse that caused many young folk to throw off the restraints of their elders (in an attempt to free themselves from hypocrisy or racism or class-driven tastes masquerading as absolute truths) also left behind some important things, like a respect for certain ethics and an interest in things that aren't "fresh" (young, timely, cool).

So how does one cover such a new cultural universe? Every magazine editor has to take into account differences between his own tastes and what his staff and readers like. But when editorial meetings start being more about what will sell than what seems most interesting or worthy of coverage, it's hard to remember why you wanted to do journalism in the first place. This is most glaring when it comes to the coveted cover. At a place like *VIBE*, massive popular talents such as Santana may seem like logical cover choices, but they're not, because they're considered to be too old. And old, the logic goes, don't sell. In fact, there's almost no chance of seeing someone on the cover of the new *VIBE* over 35, no matter how interesting—or how naked.

What's worse, though, are the pressures exerted on editors that relate more directly to the editing process. At *Vibe* we covered a lot of stuff because it was supposedly "hot," even if we thought it was crap. We didn't always cover it as intelligently as we should. I've been in more than one editorial battle with

someone in power who complained that a well-written music review was too negative, even though they knew full well that the music sucked and deserved to be panned.

The difficulty in presenting well-balanced critical journalism only gets harder when you consider that the music labels themselves often pay for writers to fly places and cover their artists, not just at *VIBE* but at many major magazines. Magazine editors often consent because of limited budgets or the sometimes valid belief that a closer relationship with a particular publicist or artist will translate into better stories and better journalism simply

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because of better access. There's even one writer who occassionally sleeps with the artists she covers, and her defenders insist that it makes for more intimate, complex coverage than she would have gotten otherwise. Does it violate the journalistic trust between the magazine and its readers if the reporter doesn't disclose her intimate relations with her subject? Absolutely, but few seem to care.

What's simply inexcusable is the fact that magazines give special coverage (or "softball" coverage) to some of the music industry professionals who are known to give the magazine the biggest ad dollars. It's not that editors are necessarily given an explicit warning not to say anything negative about the artist, but there's an unspoken understanding that you don't want to piss people off (a fear that's endemic in the magazine industry where positive coverage equals access and access equals more celebs for celeb-hungry readers). So, for instance, when suspicions are raised about whether or not music mogul Sean "Puffy" Combs may have been partially responsible for the death of his star rapper Biggie, the editor of the story has to fight to ask Combs the tough questions and has to fight again to print what is discovered.

It's often suggested that such compromises are symptomatic of a broader cultural phenomenon: the drive to satisfy the relentless consumer demand for entertainment (which in turn helps shape tastes and create more demand) by any means necessary. According to Neal Gabler, author of "Life the Movie," there is reason to be concerned. "While an entertainment-driven, celebrity-oriented society is not necessarily one that destroys all moral value, as some would have it, it is one in which the standard of value is whether or not something can grab and then hold the public's attention," he writes. "It is a society in which those things that do not conform—for example, serious literature, serious political debate, serious ideas, serious anything—are more likely to be compromised or marginalized than ever before."

Not surprisingly, the young are at the forefront of this fast-paced culture of consumption. While adults settle into one identity and simplify their consumer choices, youth continually seek to define themselves as different from their parents and each other, and do so by choosing new and different things to consume, things with which they can reshape their identity ad infinitum.

"It's not just the content, it's the way it's presented," says Michael Fields of WNET. "In an admittedly well-written television show like 'Homicide,' it's the multilayered sound, the verité style, and the cutting that's upsetting—not just upsetting, but offensive—to some older people. They take it as a sign that the world is leaving them behind."

Imagine how much more profound that feeling of alienation would be if everyone else was downloading the show onto a computer and watching it in split-screen format while talking in a web site chat room. The point is not only that the new generation has different tastes, but that they're wired, and the way they're wired changes the nature of their tastes as consumers and producers. For example, if your first TV experience is post-MTV, chances are you're inherently more comfortable with quick-cutting and fast-paced imagery. You know how to process information faster, and, because of familiarity with codes (someone, say, throwing up a "W" hand sign to signify their loyalty to the West Coast), you know what images refer to. You come to expect

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a certain style and a certain speed from whatever art or entertainment gets hurled your way.

So an old person, like my grandfather, may say that these damn kids have no patience nowadays because they don't want to sit through long-take AMC classics, much less a good stage play. Well, maybe they are impatient, but maybe for good reason. We're all beholden to the magic power of speed, the young more than the old. Just think for a second about your computer. A 1980s' Mac Classic was considered pretty fast when it came out. Now stick anyone with an iMac in front of that old computer and watch whether or not they have the patience to wait for it to boot up. Anyone who is used to the speed of the new computer will find themselves becoming not just mentally annoyed, but physically annoyed—increased heart rate and body temperature—with the slowness of that piece of technology, not to mention the bland, low-resolution black-and-white screen.

Nicole Jefferson, a UCLA film school graduate and professional screenwriter, says that at 29 years of age, she feels like she's standing on the line between the old and new generations. "I love the fact that the culture is opening up to new sounds and new stories and new ways of communicating through images, but I wonder what we're losing in the process," she says. "It does seem as though a lot of filmmakers are more interested these days in the cool things you can show and the cool ways you can present them than what story is being told. The attention to the parts has come at the expense of the whole."

This is also due in part to changes in the film editing process. The old cut-and-paste method of editing has given way to AVID, a digital process that allows people to mix and match frames of film at high speeds in infinite ways. "It opens up new possibilities for what you can do with film, but it also makes the editing process less precious," says Jefferson. "It introduces a distance between the film material itself and the editor that, I think, sometimes translates into an artificiality on screen."

That may be true, but the oft-voiced concern—especially among the older generation—that attention to flashy imagery may be rendering good narrative storytelling extinct seems overstated. For every bad "Pulp Fiction" knockoff, there are still plenty of quality stories ranging from the young and quirky ("Election") to the adult and serious ("The Insider"). As James Schamus, head of indie film company Good Machine and writer/producer of "The Ice Storm," has said: "There is probably as much good filmmaking going on now as there was 30 or 40 years ago, but because we just see the good ones that have lasted, we assume otherwise."

Still, there are so many stories nowadays that it's getting hard to know which ones matter. Due to ever-increasing rates of production and the ever-expanding desire for stuff at faster and faster speeds, we're being hit with so many more channels, web sites, shows, movies, books, records, ideas, etc., than our parents ever had to contend with. The multiplicity of images and the influx of information has grown too fast for our ability to process it all. According to David Shenk, the author of "Data Smog," too much information with too little contextualization is leading not to better quality of life, but instead cultivating "stress, confusion, and even ignorance. . .information doesn't have to be unwanted and unattractive to be harmful."

"I think such concerns may be a little exaggerated," says Sacha Jenkins, 28, who recently quit his job as music editor of *VIBE* to write, produce records, and seek funding to turn his own music magazine, *Ego Trip*, into a multimedia dot-com venture. "For young people who grew up with the Internet, it's not an issue; the way things are just seems natural. You filter out things that don't interest you, instinctively. It may look like chaos from the outside, but not if you understand the language and the codes of whatever context you're working in. For me, access to information means that I'm able to explore more, to discover new histories, to experience different kinds of art, to engage in discussion with more people. What's the problem?"

There will always be differences of opinion between kids and parents that fall roughly along generational lines. But the latest generation gap between old and young, or between highbrow and no-brow, or between tech-savvy and not, is really more a problem of communication than anything else. The more that old folk wire into the new technologies and the more they remember to do what they taught us young folk—to ask questions—the more the gap will narrow. My father, for instance, is too busy clinging to his authority to consider that the young might have something to teach him about the world. Though I've talked with him many times about his love of jazz, his fierce distaste for rap music has prevented him from ever once asking why I might find it interesting.

In many ways, "Any Given Sunday" captures the current cultural mood. It's a film that's a little more style than substance, with all the quick cutting, hyper-speed camera movements and frenetic collisions set to blaring hip hop beats and rock 'n' roll noise. But as much as it may have benefitted from more careful storytelling, the message is on point. At first, Pacino's old white D'Amato and Foxx's young black Beamen fight each other bitterly and keep losing. But soon, Coach Stone Age realizes that he needs to become less rigid in his ways, pay attention to his young player's style and give him some room to run. Beamen, in turn, opens himself up to the wisdom of his coach. Once the two learn to work together, they not only stomp out the competition, they regain their self-respect and their hope for a better future.