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Book Review: All About the Beat

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Cover Page Footnote

All about the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America John McWhorter New York: Gotham Books, 2008 ISBN 978-1592403745 186 pp.

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John McWhorter

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Book Review: *All about the Beat*

For more than twenty years there has been talk of a hip-hop revolution, a political transformation sparked solely by one genre of music, which will forever change the lives of black people living in America, and perhaps even beyond their borders. In *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*, John McWhorter not only scoffs at such an idea, but explores in detail the many reasons why such a revolution will never occur, so long as hip-hop music continues down the same path it has travelled for the last twenty-plus years.

McWhorter develops themes as to why a hip-hop revolution cannot, has not, and will not exist early on in the book and then offers the reader a closer look at each theme throughout the chapters. While five such chapters create the body of this text, the reader is left with more questions than answers as the book in its entirety is under two hundred pages in length. Nevertheless, McWhorter's overall thesis – that hip-hop music is only music and at this rate that is all it will ever amount to be – quickly starts to take shape and he skilfully presents his work as one chapter, however short it may be, easily flows into the next. Chapter 1 offers insight to McWhorter's clarification of political activism versus political attitude, ending with his opinion that hip-hop artists are well versed in attitude and only that. In chapter 2 he considers the revolutionary efforts of those who he refers to as "conscious" hip-hops artists, a select group who are critically revered though not always popular by mainstream standards, but finds they need to work harder on their perception of the differences between something that is revolutionary and something that is merely positive. McWhorter then explains to his audience in chapter 3 that the black political policies some hip-hop artists do promote are ultimately not in sync with the strategies that have proven to be of benefit to African Americans. In chapter 4 McWhorter criticizes hip-hop's almost natural inclination to dramatize the insignificant obstacles because they ultimately sound better against a beat than does the substandard sound of working long and hard on something for years. McWhorter then gently eases into chapter 5 with his claims that audiences are in fact so much in tune with the beat of hip-hop that they are altogether ignoring what is even being said, focusing instead only on how it is being said.

Currently a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a weekly columnist for *The New York Sun*, McWhorter has also written ten other books all of which in some way or another intertwine the two topics of race relations and linguistics. Such publications would be expected given his credentials, which include a B.A. in French from Rutgers University, a M.A. in American Studies from New York University and a Ph.D. in linguistics from Stanford, along with the associate professor of linguistic positions he held at Cornell University and the University of California, Berkeley, which totalled a span of ten years. Oddly enough, it can quickly become frustrating while reading the book to be aware of the education and apparent passion he has for the subject as there is a blatant unwillingness on his behalf to take a step beyond making mere observations about the falsehoods his peers perpetuate and actually propose an original and realistic outline for change.

McWhorter does acknowledge the previous work of his colleagues numerous times throughout the book but fails to delve deep enough to legitimately challenge any of their positions, an element that the reader keeps anticipating but it never satisfied with. There is an abundance of examples of McWhorter disbanding the arguments of others and his persuasive explanations for doing so actually sound plausible to the reader, but at no point in *All About the Beat* does he ever offer any recommendations of his own. As this bad habit continues to make reappearances throughout the book, over time his once persuasive explanations lose their steam and they start to sound more like a small child whining to their mother. As a student of higher education, he has experienced the post-secondary rigors that require you to dismantle an argument from the opposition while simultaneously strengthening your position by providing a valid solution in its place. One could suppose that a reader will find themselves left with a residual feeling of disappointment after perusing *All About the Beat* because they expected more from him, given his professional and educational history. Everyone is aware of how easy it can sometimes be to tear apart someone else's argument; the real skill is how effectively you can not only reduce someone's argument, but put forth your own resolution which is anchored in validity.

However frustrated the reader can become with the argumentative style of the author, there at least is a fluid feeling to the organizational layout of each chapter. The reader will quickly notice a common pattern throughout the book; a chapter begins with McWhorter stating various popularly held notions concerning the responsibility hip-hop music has in relation to black politics, which is then followed by a carefully executed deconstruction that cites multiple sources that most often, if not always, strongly disprove the popularly held notions. Repetitively throughout the entirety of the book, a popularly held notion is

presented and a source is provided to disprove it, over and over again. While making your way through the book you start to ask yourself over and over why no one else thus far has suggested McWhorter's opinions, because they really do seem to make sense, some even seem blatantly obvious. It is for this reason, his clever and compelling execution of disproving something that you yourself believed in five minutes earlier, that makes it so very frustrating when he repeatedly fails to toss his hat into the ring and offer his own suggestions for change. At some points throughout the read it even feels like he is holding out on us, that he really does have the perfect solution intertwined with endless supportive sources but for some reason he never wants to share it with us. One could argue that it was never his intention to offer any kind of solution, but once you start reading the material it becomes impossible not to feel his genuine enthusiasm and passion for the subject travel from the words on the page into your own body, and it becomes impossible to believe that he has not dwelled endlessly on his conception for an ideal start to the overall change he so desperately wants to see in hip-hop music.

McWhorter does include a well-rounded collection of both primary and secondary sources, although the use of footnotes would have been helpful when trying to quickly associate the various a statement with their authors. A bibliography can be found at the end of the book, though it was selective as it only included his secondary sources. McWhorter does an excellent job of supporting his views with references to numerous sources; however, his failure to include a caveat regarding the questionable reliability of such sources comes across as a juvenile mistake, especially since a large portion of the sources are of government descent. Furthermore, although the government sources are well-suited to his numerous arguments, a select few that are supports for his strongest arguments are also much older than others, causing them to start working against any point he was trying to make as the reader starts questioning why such an old study is being used. His failure to offer any explanation regarding the age of the sources, a task that appears to be overly simple, begins fuelling reservations in the heads of readers that ultimately lead to their questioning the authors' tactics: Why is he using such an old study? Or *is* this the most recent study on the topic? Does a younger study exist, but he is opting not to use it because it fails support his argument as well as the older study does? This is an obvious weakness within the book and it unfortunately happens more than once. It is a worrisome element that ultimately leads to the loss of his overall persuasion on the subject. Once the reader stops being convinced because they are interrupted by their own thoughts, thoughts that seriously ponder his choice of source, it in turn leads them to begin to question his motives, which results in it becoming quite the difficult task for him to recover and regain the influence over the perception of the readers.

Overall, *All About the Beat* is an eye-opener to what could become of hip-hop music if only its' artists efforts were properly channelled. A hip-hop fan can instantly appreciate the quality of McWhorter's message as the musical references and lyrical quotes that are strung throughout the book display his legitimate love for the genre. One can only hope that McWhorter has only just begun to undertake the larger-than-life task of steering hip-hop music and its culture towards the light of truly revolutionary black politics