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At
INSTITUTE OF CARIBBEAN STUDIES
SYMPOSIUM ON THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF JAMAICAN POPULAR MUSIC
February 26, 2011

(These views are not necessarily those of the Broadcasting Commission)

“Media, Music and Popular Culture”

I am not going to repeat the findings of numerous research studies over the last three decades that have indicated that music which incorporates aggressive themes and harsh, strident tones and verses actually has the power to increase the potential for aggressive behavior, especially in impressionable young persons.

I will instead rely on the tacit knowledge of those who create art, such as the American lyricist, E.Y. Harburg who said “Words make you think a thought. Music makes you feel a feeling. A song makes you feel a thought”.

And Rex Nettleford, who said “it is the creative mind that has plumbed the depths of our anguish and celebrated our possibilities, producing words and music...to define, discover and articulate our humanity”.

So, it is accurate to say that our popular music is really an internal narrative, about culture, and if, as Marley says, Music is a food for life, then when we examine our popular music themes, we should glean a tacit understanding of music’s impact on culture.

In “Slackness Hiding from Culture: Erotic Play in the Dancehall”, Carolyn Cooper concluded that the dancehall Music is not mere entertainment but ideological weaponry, disturbing the peace. She could have substituted those words with proverbs 18: 21 which tells us that "Death and life are in the power of the tongue"

So, what are we saying about ourselves through popular music? Cooper identified 5 themes in dancehall. I have distilled from those five themes and based on my personal experience, 5 discordant principles:

1. Love thy neighbor! But also, be conceited and self-absorbed!
2. Discipline yourself! But also take risks in order to enjoy yourself!
3. The people are poor and must be uplifted! But the people should consume and live with abundance, outside their means!
4. Do your duty! But blame everybody else!
5. Fight for your rights, justice and social equality! But exploit women and oppress men who are different!

Up to 2009 there was an imbalance in those messages, expressed in the extreme. After the Broadcasting Commission stepped in and called a halt to frequently violent, crude and excessively sexual music, some people argued that such portrayals should be tolerated and even promoted on the understanding that it can be an outlet for vicariously releasing hostility or inhibitions in the safety of virtual reality. However, research had long tested this “catharsis theory” and revealed that, particularly in the case of children, the most potent effect has been to de-sensitise young people to real life experiences.

Beyond that, as we have seen from several recent incidents, nowadays it is quite difficult to draw a firm line between artistic creative imagination and "real life" activities of artistes. This is most worrying, because they become role models for young people who seem completely oblivious to their own inexperience and vulnerability.

The danger is that the artiste, as creator of content, is not simply an agent of “reflection”, but equally an agent of “influence”; They are not empty vessels waiting for society to fill them up. They hold a world view, philosophies and ideologies which shape the messages they create, influence people and direct culture in various ways.

The problem is that for too many of our young people, reality is being constructed by trauma, stigma, exclusion, discrimination, low self-esteem, absentee parents, present but incapable parents, poisonous role models, sexual exploitation, sexual violence, failed institutions, normalisation of low standards, failed leadership, and a generally hostile environment [framed in the mother of all schizophrenia, - “Jamaica is the third happiest nation on earth”]. No wonder Professor Hickling says half of us are mental.

These are precipitators of dysfunctional tendencies – and it is these tendencies that are exploited by those whose lyrics promote, celebrate and validate acts of self-denial, self-deprecation, low empathy, and lack of hope for the future.

A study was done by Professor Patricia Anderson on male gender attitudes across social classes, using a scale to measure traditional macho attitudes.

That study established a coherent set of attitudes which define masculinity in terms of dominance, virility and domestic freedom. It was found that this normative system is a driving force for child-bearing, fathering and male-female interaction. The macho image of the Jamaican Male, it was found, contributes to brutish and disrespectful attitude towards women and sexual risk-taking.

This finding looms large if it is accepted, as Ellen Koskoff posits, that 'one's social sexual identity, or gender, is a very central concept in music, linked with interaction between the sexes'.

This is the prism through which we must look to find the impact of our indigenous popular music on culture. Through that prism I see a promotion or reinforcement of Jamaica's male macho character within themes ranging from "nuff gal inna bungle", to "Ole Dawg" to "man a gallis", coming from "trailor load a gal" and the most desirable and ambitious of them all, "I want you an my sweetheart to be friends".

As professor Anderson points out, this continuum will remain unchanged unless it is subverted by "the basic premise that behaviour can be changed, if knowledge is increased and if attitudes can be altered".

The complication, is that we are in the midst of a digital revolution which is re-defining how music is created and disseminated and which requires us to rethink everything we have thought about the past, present, even the future impact of popular music on culture.

In this dynamic digital environment, content and technology are no longer separable. So, there is need for us to look afresh at how to protect and enhance social and cultural values; and promote social objectives such as protection for vulnerable sectors of society.

One important aspect must be the cultivation of a level of media literacy to ensure that the average population can participate in this new convergent media culture, discern the impact of content on their lives and make informed judgement about the content which is accessed.

The aim of media literacy is for citizens to recognise how the content in media, in our case, music, filter their perceptions and beliefs, shape popular culture and influence personal choices. Without this capacity, it is not to be expected that the citizen is in a good position to be a reliable source from which to measure the impact of popular music on culture.

It is for this reason that the Broadcasting Commission, with the support of UNESCO, embarked on a media literacy project which was launched in 2007.

This involves an infusion of the R.O.S.E. Grade 7-9 Language Arts and Social Studies Curricula with the Grade 4-6 Media Literacy curricula for students to become responsive

to the changing nature of information in our society and the challenges of adjusting to a technologically influenced global village.

The learning activities and objectives include discussions on why some music videos are not appropriate for their age group; critical responses to songs that influence positive and negative attitudes; recognition of moral values portrayed by entertainers; and comparisons between genres, in particular classic reggae music and dancehall. The students will be prepared to develop resistance to media influences by the use of higher order critical thinking skills implicit in questioning, analyzing and evaluating content.

Media education, therefore, is being made a central part of the basic entitlement of every citizen to freedom of expression and the right to information. It will also be an instrumental precursor to any reliable measure of the true impact of music.

To the artiste, I say, yours is a simpler measure of impact. It is not the lyrics themselves, but often the context in which they are portrayed which can make the difference between “learning about” and “learning to be”. So, the ultimate measure of impact is as Mahatma Gandhi would have put it:

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt...apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest [Jamaican] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the [lyrics] you contemplate are going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny?"

The answer is the true measure of impact, and it can only be negative or positive.