

Gays Protest Jamaican Reggae, Not American Rap

Middle-aged gay white men tried to stop a Jamaican artist from visiting the United States yesterday, instead of looking at the homophobia in their own backyard.

Jamaican international reggae artist Beenie Man (Anthony Moses Davis), who performed yesterday in Rochester, New York, has earned criticism from gay groups for lyrics like, "I'm dreaming of a new Jamaica, come to execute all the gays."

In 2004, protests by British pressure group OutRage! convinced Viacom to pull Beenie Man's scheduled performance from the MTV Video Music Awards.

Beenie Man took the stage at the Water Street Music Hall in Rochester, a city with a strong African-American presence, about 38 percent of its total population. The promoters, understandably, hoped Friday's performance would happen without hoopla--the show wasn't even listed on Water Street's online calendar.

A similar fracas at the same Water Street venue last September almost sidelined Buju Banton, the Jamaican superstar whose 1992 song "Boom Bye Bye" described the lethal shooting of a "batty boy" -- Jamaican patois for an effeminate gay man.

Many Americans first learned of Banton from director Isaac Julien's 1994 documentary "The Darker Side of Black," which featured compelling interviews with critics and musicians -- many of them black, gay, or both -- including Banton himself. The film also featured feminist BritHop icon Monie Love, as well as Ice Cube, who admitted to second thoughts about two lines from his 1992 hit "Horny Little Devil": "[M]ust be F-A-G… /… [T]rue niggaz ain't gay."

"The Darker Side of Black" exposed the deep homophobia in some Caribbean and hip-hop music, but also promoted gay and gay-positive hip-hop artists who are rarely profiled in the gay press. Most fascinating of all, Julien's film explored the feminist, matriarchal impulses that run through Caribbean dancehall music.

But while LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) groups protest the homophobia in Caribbean reggae lyrics, a much more threatening trend is taking place in American hip-hop, where white rapper Eminem has done more to spread homophobia with his lyrics than any reggae artist could ever hope to.

In May 2000, gays began boycotting the white rapper's 2000 sophomore release, "The Marshall Mathers LP," whose title song, "Marshall Mathers," included many lines that made Ice Cube's words seem almost benign: "My words are a dagger with a jagged edge / That'll stab you in the head whether you're a fag or lez," and the pithy "Hate fags? The answer's yes."

The famously petulant and potty-mouthed rapper is probably more blameworthy than any pop-culture figure of the last 25 years for repopularizing the term "faggot" in white America. "Faggot" is far more hurtful in the West than a pidgin word like "batty boy," which is derived from "bottom," an American and European sexual slang term.

But let's be clear: Eminem didn't start this trend in 2000, he just brought it back from the --well, if not the grave, then from the infirmary ward.

Five years earlier, in 1995, mainstream popularity of the teenage taunt "faggot" was on the decline -- partly due to AIDS-galvanized action groups, partly due to a gay-savvy president in the White House, and partly due to the emergence of an LGBT youth culture. For the first time in history in the early '90s, gay teenagers were coming out en masse, and soon enough, laws were emerging in Massachusetts, New York, and California to protect LGBT youth from hate language and violence and to levy severe financial penalties against schools who failed to comply. But then, in May 2000, when a white rapper named Eminem, who couldn't credibly or marketably use the "N" word, started saying "faggot" instead, the epithet gained purchase with a new generation of young, mostly white, mostly male fans.

Today, more than 10 years after Eminem's debut, the word "faggot" is a common synonym for a "dorky" or "non-macho" male among young white males. As Berkeley Sociologist C. J. Pascoe recently recorded, suburban black male students are routinely punished for saying "faggot" to white students, whereas white students who use the slur among each other are either ignored or merely tut-tutted by their mostly white teachers. In the oddest turn of all, since at least

2002—the year Eminem released his third album—Eminem has become wildly popular with gay audiences. His audiences, in fact, tend to be slightly gayer than the general population, and a lot gayer than the audiences of the scores of black hip-hop artists like Monie Love and MC Lyte who've never said "faggot" onstage in their lives. This prodigal popularity is largely due to the fact that Eminem liberally shows off the branded band of his underwear and even his boyish backside—but it's also due to his duets with Elton John at the 2001 Grammy Awards and on his 2004 CD.

Threatened with continued boycotts and protests from LGBT action groups in 2001, Eminem showed up frequently in the media to assert that when he said, "faggot," he didn't mean "homosexual," but rather, "effeminate male." Eminem's gay audiences have supported this explanation, and many seem to have come around to his way of thinking about effeminacy, too. Social critic Riki Wilchins calls this the "Eminem effect": the sudden acceptability of the word "faggot" and its synonyms in contemporary gay and mainstream culture.

Oh, and one more thing. The producers of the MTV Video Music Awards, while they've never asked Beenie Man back after snubbing him in 2004, perennially feature Eminem--most recently as the "unwitting" recipient of some bare-bottomed flirtation from "Bruno," the effeminate gay alter-ego of straight comic Sacha Baron Cohen. Apparently, some activists, music fans, and even television producers are operating under the same assumption held by Pascoe's suburban schoolteachers, who punish their black students but let the white ones go unscathed: Boys will be boys—as long as they're white.