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Hurt's Documentary Puts Hip-Hop on Hot Seat

By Juhie Bhatia, WeNews Correspondent

Byron Hurt was asking questions about hip-hop's portrayal of women for years before Don Imus ignited an explosive national debate on the topic. Now screenings of his documentary "Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes" keep the discussion going.

(WOMENSENEWS) – Byron Hurt wants to make one thing very clear: He loves hip-hop.

But the activist filmmaker has been questioning the music's depiction of women for more than a decade, long before Don Imus' slur of black female college basketball stars set off a national debate on the language that some rappers use.

For years Hurt raised questions about the treatment of women as an educator with a program about gender violence aimed at male college athletes.



Byron Hurt

These days he has shifted his focus to hip-hop's portrayal of women and has a film that does much of the talking and questioning for him. "Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes" explores manhood, sexism, violence and homophobia in hip-hop culture. It premiered at the Sundance film festival in 2006, has been shown at more than 30 international festivals and had its U.S. debut on PBS in February.

Currently, the film is being shown at colleges across the country, conferences, grassroots events and community programs. In May, the film will screen at a Swiss television conference and the Ford Foundation has launched a two-year initiative to screen it on historically black college campuses. Since the Imus controversy, Hurt said he has also received increased requests for media interviews and screenings.

The film is often accompanied with panel discussions or question-and-answer sessions that Hurt tries to attend. There are also resources available to go along with the film such as a classroom curriculum for high school and college students that emphasizes media literacy and spurs students to think about hip-hop culture and masculinity.

The documentary is also being used as an education tool in the classroom. Gail Dines, for instance, a professor of sociology and women's studies and chair of American Studies at Wheelock College in Boston, shows the film in her courses on the sociology of race, women's studies and media.

"My students are the MTV generation, so they don't respond to print," said Dines. "They respond to images. That's why this film is so powerful. It uses hip-hop images to deconstruct hip-hop. It's rare that a documentary is a good teaching tool. Byron is an example of the work filmmakers can do if they are political and have courage."

'Getting Men to Speak Out'

"Byron has been out there for 14 years doing anti-sexism work," said Jackson Katz, author of the 2006 book, "The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help," and an educator and advocate who works on violence prevention programs with men and boys. "'Beyond Beats and Rhymes' takes that work to a new audience and medium, but it's the same activism. It's getting men to speak out about men's violence against women."

Hurt first began working on the film one afternoon in 2000, when he was watching Black Entertainment Television. One music video after another, he noticed, showed rappers posing and throwing money at the camera, with women dancing around them.

"I saw how formulaic, hypersexual, hyper-aggressive and materialistic the images were," said Hurt, who lives in Plainfield, N.J. "I thought to myself it's time to make a film. I pulled out a piece of paper and started writing a proposal."

In the film Hurt interviews well-known rappers and hip-hop moguls about masculinity and sexism and pays tribute to hip-hop, while questioning its representation of manhood and women.

"This film is Byron's autobiographical story," said Katz, who is also the co-founder of the gender-violence awareness program where Hurt began probing some of the issues raised in the film. "By Byron putting himself on camera and talking about his own journey, he puts a human face on a cultural critique of hip-hop and allows men – especially men of color – to go through that journey vicariously through him."

Hip-Hop Before Football

Hurt fell in love with hip-hop as a boy. Later, as a student at Northeastern University in Boston, where he studied radio and television journalism and was also a star quarterback, he listened to hip-hop before his football games to get psyched up. He never questioned the lyrics.

After he graduated in 1993 an athletic advisor recommended him as an educator for the violence prevention program that Katz co-founded, called Mentors in Violence

Prevention, which is considered the leading prevention initiative used in professional and college athletic programs.

“I was reluctant to take the job,” said Hurt. “I didn’t know any other guys who spoke out about violence against women. I was concerned about how my male friends would view me. Now when I look back it seems so silly, but at the time it was really important.”

But Katz invited Hurt to a workshop and during the training he asked the men what they did to prevent being raped and sexually assaulted. The answer came back: nothing.

When Katz asked the women the same question, though, they came up with a list of safeguards: everything from the buddy system to not jogging alone at night. Hurt had no idea that women took such active precautions as a matter of routine. He realized he could learn a lot from the job.

Hurt became a mentor training specialist, educating male athletes about violence against women. He started conducting workshops at college campuses in New England and eventually conducted them nationally and within the Marine Corps. He worked with Mentors in Violence Prevention until 1997.

Masculinity Explored on Film

Hurt also continued making documentaries. He produced his first film as a senior in college. Called “Moving Memories: The Black Senior Video Yearbook,” it is about the trials and tribulations of being a black college student on a predominantly white campus in New England. Then he made “I Am a Man: Black Masculinity in America” in 1994, which looks at how issues of masculinity play out in society and the differences among races.

In his latest film one of the topics Hurt explores is how major corporations have narrowed hip-hop’s portrayal of black manhood.

“Hip-hop has always been hyper-aggressive, homophobic and sexist, but there was more diversity before,” said Hurt. “In mainstream hip-hop right now there’s a more narrow vision of masculinity and manhood than in 1989 when hip-hop wasn’t mainstream.”

Mainstream hip-hop doesn’t have to be so limited, though, as can be seen with the song “Classic” by Kanye West, Nas, KRS1 and Rakim, added Hurt, who describes the song as a demonstration of “pure” musical skill.

The filmmaker said that rap stars have a responsibility to expand the vision of masculinity by singing about topics other than drugs and violence – but consumers must also be critical of the music they purchase.

The problem, he added, is much bigger than hip-hop culture though. “How can you fight something as big as sexism, patriarchy and hyper-aggression? Boys and men all over the

country--whether they listen to hip-hop or not--are indoctrinated. We need a broader education of boys and men that allows them to express the full range of manhood.”

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For more information:

Byron Hurt: <http://www.bhurt.com/>

The Independent Television Service (ITVS) Resources:
<http://www.itvs.org/outreach/hiphop/>

Jackson Katz: <http://www.jacksonkatz.com/index.html>

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