

The Fine Line That Separates Life and Art

By Amy E. Wong



James Brown died on Christmas morning at the age of 73. As one of the most influential musicians, he had a hand in defining funk, disco, and rap. It's no wonder that he earned the title, "The Godfather of Soul." Like many great artists, he gifted both the stage and his music with his own personal touch.

I wonder, though, exactly how much of himself did James Brown, a father of modern day rap, invest in his lyrics. As I mentioned in a blog entry last week, prosecutors have been using gangsta rap lyrics in their attempts to reveal a defendants' motives and personalities. On Dec. 20, a jury convicted Ronell Wilson of murdering two undercover police officers. He now faces a possible death sentence. A major factor of the jury's verdict was Wilson's poetry, which boasted of leaving .45-caliber slugs in his enemies' heads.

My question is: How telling are lyrics? Brown's hit songs, "I Feel Good" and "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag" don't reveal much of Brown's personal life. They don't reflect his domestic troubles and his drug and alcohol abuse problems. They're fun funk songs about shakin' things up and gettin' your groove thang on.

There is, however, one major exception, "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud." Like many rap lyrics, Brown's "Say It Loud" is a reminder for the black community to persevere. Of course, it doesn't mention leaving bullets in someone's head, but it does say, "We'd rather die on our feet / Than be livin' on our knees." Rap songs, it can be argued, are about defiance, rebellion, and strength.

I think it's dangerous to assume that art imitates life, especially in the case of gangsta rap. After NWA popularized violent rap lyrics in the '90s, rap evolved into a monster of sorts, boasting about riches (bling) and weapons (guns and killing). But maybe, underneath it all, rappers are still singing about the same old things: strength and rebellion.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not condoning violent rap lyrics. I'm just afraid of this emerging courtroom trend. Rappers, like many other artists, work at creating a story and selling an image.