Rap music is at the centre of a storm in the US. Controversy rages over lyrics and lifestyle alike. Is it subversive or just sexist - or is it both? David Nichols and McKenzie Wark argue the toss.

Any Australian who wants to discuss the sexist, racist, or homophobic content of rap records has to start by addressing the question that always worries me about this kind of thing: "What would we know anyway?"

Rap music - that distinctive blend of spoken, almost versified, vocals and aggressive rhythm - was the American black musical form of the 'eighties. In various forms it's colonised most mainstream pop music, and even many television commercials.

Australia hasn't produced any rap music worth bothering about (sorry, aside from Mighty Big Crime). Moreover, though we may superficially have social conditions similar to those of ghetto America in some parts of our cities, they're tiny by comparison - and it's fatuous to make comparisons between Aborigines and American blacks. At any rate, it seems that the biggest racial group in Australia embracing rap music is second (and third?) generation Italian and Greek kids. Just like punk rock, rap isn't a working class phenomenon in Australia, it's a middle class thing. Most 'things' are, round here.

So, like rock and roll, like any popular music, we are importing rap culture and breaking it off at the stem from its...well, from its roots. JJJ trends and danceclubbers and suburban teenagers have all embraced rap wholeheartedly partly because it's big o/s and partly just because it happens to be magnificent (which must count for something).

But now we have a situation where people who would laugh themselves silly over the foolish macho posturings of the heavy metalers in This Is Spinal Tap are happy to indulge rappers like LL Cool J or Ice T or even the relatively innocuous MC Hammer in their eternal quest for pussy.

MC Hammer, for instance, is a very commercial guy, and his LP Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em is certainly predominantly a dance record. But you'd think anybody even slightly liberal would be put off the cool MC when they get to the track (the last on his latest album) "She's Soft and Wet" in which he asks girls if they are soft and wet because he likes girls soft and wet and if they are soft and wet...etc.etc. The coyness of the lyrics makes it worse in a way.

Rap music can be wonderful, a musical form that provokes all the same furious emotions in stuffy old white folks that rock and roll used to do up until about 30 years ago. That doesn't mean it won't be assimilated the same way as rock was, however, and in fact steps were taken in that direction long ago. (Probably the first was Blondie's appalling 12" single Rapture in which Debbie Harry "rapped" something which, popular wisdom held at the time, she made up as she went along. That almost excused it.)

But there are still a few creases that have to be ironed out before rap gets completely commercialised and bland. Like, for instance, these appalling sexual innuendos. And the racism of many rappers.

A lot of black rappers - male black rappers - seem to have an awful lot on their plates. There's all that sex to get done - and you women think household chores are exhausting! they seem to be saying. (Actually, that's not quite fair. I've never heard a rap record that explicitly or implicitly stated women should be doing any-
thing in particular when they're not giving pleasure to a man. The general attitude is, I guess, the same as hippiedom—be free, give yourself freely to me.)

2 Live Crew are the guys who really got themselves caught in the thick of it with their LP, As Nasty As They Wanna Be. The cover—with the lads on the beach, their four heads between four bathing beauties’ legs—gives adequate indication of the record’s contents. Give the album’s track list a quick perusal (Me So Horny and an item about King Dick spring to mind) and it should not come as a great surprise to discover that it’s caused a furore in the USA, where it’s been a victim of the labelling campaign adopted by the record industry after pressure from the moral majority.

It feels wrong quoting lyrics from As Nasty As They Wanna Be; it’s, of course, a party album and not meant to be examined by ghoulish messed-up puritans such as myself. One track begins with a monologue presumably taken from a porn movie and then fades to the fabulous party scene: “When the party’s over we can get together/Go to my house and fuck forever/And do whatever comes to mind/Let me stick my dick in your behind/Love is the key to end all your woes/You’ll be my bitch, not a dirty ho”. Any further comment seems superfluous.

One of the most interesting things I’ve found about having the 2 Live Crew’s LP around the house is the reactions of my friends to it. My sister dismissed it instantly as ‘hump music’, but others—men and women—refuse to listen to it or even be interested in it. So if the 2 Live Crew are out to dismay straitlaced white liberals, they’ve certainly succeeded in my living room. Their LP could be meant to be funny or maybe just shocking: it’s certainly the latter. Whatever it is, it certainly has going for it one of the best defence mechanisms ever created: one which protects all sorts of entertainment and media that people might find offensive or threatening. That is the assumption (which I can’t help being affected by) that anyone who seeks to examine it or criticise it is a fool, or worse.

Whatever their other faults may be, Public Enemy are not similarly anti-intellectual, though people familiar with them only by their reputation may think otherwise. The most famous thing about Public Enemy must be their oft-reported anti-semitism—propagated, it seems, by group member Professor Griff. I’m not saying anyone’s been misunderstood or misquoted—it seems certain that Griff is definitely a paranoid racist (he was interviewed in the US press last year as Public Enemy’s “Minister of Information” and made headlines with outrageous statements about the connection between the words “jew” and “jewellery”—nice late-period Hitler material). Griff was sacked from the group for speaking his mind, and rightly so. He was later reinstated, for reasons that remain unclear.

Public Enemy’s newest LP is called Fear of a Black Planet, and though, lyrically, it doesn’t deal with any of the controversy around the band, its four instrumental tracks do comment to some degree on what Public Enemy seems to see as a racist smear campaign. Incident at 66.6 FM combines some fascinating snippets of radio talkback about the Public Enemy controversy. One caller says “when I see somebody who’s wearing one of their shirts, I think that they’re scum”. Another (who, frankly, sounds like a ‘plant’) says “I think white liberals like yourself have difficulty understanding that Chuck’s views represent the frustrations of the majority of black youth out there today.

He—well, they actually—after all, Public Enemy’s version of events may be right. Public Enemy need a book written about them, and, even with their militaristic overtones and all that foolishness, they can’t really be lumped in with the 2 Live Crew. Their records are huge, long, epic, sensational and spectacular.

Rap music can’t simply be dismissed as one thing or another. But blind tolerance of its many unacceptable overtones is just as patronising and crass as blind dismissal. And it may be an old rock and roll argument but it’s still true—three listens to a Public Enemy record would be a lot more valuable to you than the reading of this article. As for the 2 Live Crew, I’ll put them in the ‘too hard’ basket for the time being. I’m sure nothing would delight them more.

DAVID NICHOLS until recently wrote about pop music for Smash Hits magazine.

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ALR : AUGUST 1990

GRAPHIC: COURTESY DAVID NICHOLS

PAY OR PLAY OR MAKE MY DAY, Y’UNNAPSTAN? NOW EMPTY TH TILL AN’ GIMME MY FILL!

IT’S INCRED-I-BLE THE WAY THEY CAN TALK IN RHYMES LIKE THAT!

DO NOT SHOUT OR I WILL HAFTA TAKE YOU OUT, BELIE DAT!

Y-YES, I UNDER-I-S-AND, I THINK...

OH, I KNOW!
rap or hip hop is a style of black American music which, if nothing else, attracts controversy. In Australia, ABC radio station JJJ suffered censure and industrial disputes for playing a song called 'Fuck the Police' by a crew who call themselves Niggers With Attitude. In the States, the song receives practically no airplay at all, and there seems no end to the courtroom battles over censorship and copyright.

Rap is a phenomenon which manages to raise issues of ownership and propriety, but also of black pride and autonomy, aesthetics and ethics - all in the space of a 12" dance platter. A veritable media phenomenon, and one of no small interest to others who want to challenge the hegemony of white American culture, here in Australia too.

Much of the content of rap records can be held up to scrutiny and criticism - and can be particularly offensive to white liberal sensibilities, as David Nichols argues above. But this kind of criticism can be misleading. In the first place, the values and judgments white boys like Nichols or I might put on the words in these songs might be completely different from those young American blacks might apply. Codes of respectfulness and respectability differ, and there definitely are codes about respect in this music, and frequent debate from one record to the next - not least between black male and black female artists, such as Kool Moe Dee, Ice T, Queen Latifa, De La Soul, NWA, Jungle Brothers, Salt'n'pepa, Cookie Crew and, above all, Public Enemy.

In the second place, for us white boys to make judgments about other people's cultural products necessarily implies that there are universal standards of judgment which transcend the differences in how things like respect and propriety are encoded. It's a small step from there to assuming that us white boys can make judgments based on those universal standards and find black rap wanting. Which implies that those standards are pretty much just a generalisation of white liberal attitudes.

There is a distinct lack of pluralism and respect for cultural differences in this. Worse, it denies the cultural autonomy of the black movement to decide what it thinks of black rap, and to hell with us.

However, there is an opposite danger here which comes damned close to complete cultural relativism. If it's OK for black musicians to sing songs about "fucking girls up the ass", then it's OK for the Chinese to massacre their own students in Tiananmen Square. After all, it's their business, right?

Wrong! There have to be limits to cultural autonomy. I just want to signal that making judgments about cultural products that stem from other cultures is a difficult business, but we'd better get used to it. The increasing globalisation of communications sends cultural products flying all over the place, so that 'Fuck the Police' ends up in Adelaide and Perth driving the police nuts. Meanwhile, black American navy crews are probably watching 'Crocodile Dundee' on video someplace in the Pacific trying to translate back into black English and laughing their heads off at the negro servant stereotypes.

Rather than focus too much on the 'text' of a record and hold it up to moral canons of ideological sound-
ness, it might be better to think about the channel black rap has opened up in the last decade. Many disadvantaged black urban youth drop out of school early, are very likely to be unemployed, have limited literacy skills, but watch a hell of a lot more TV than their white peers and know a lot more about pop music and comics. The beauty of rap as a form of avant garde communication is that it tries to turn these social disadvantages into a cultural advantage. Rap opens up a channel of information, debate, polemic, entertainment and affirmation without requiring folks to read journals like this one. As Chuck D of Public Enemy says, "rap is TV for black people". There's nothing on mainstream TV which is positive for young blacks; history books at school only talk about slavery and don't offer a positive image of black identity; even black commercial radio has gone mainstream and is trying to 'integrate'. What rap does is open up a channel to young black people where all else is failing them.

White liberals and the black middle class might not like what they hear if they cock an ear to that channel, but more important than what gets said in the text of these records is the fact that something gets said at all. White liberals and the black middle class often lead the charge against black rap, calling it sexist (which it sometimes, but not always, is), offensive (to whom?), racist (as if it were an equivalent thing for an oppressed minority to hate 'the man' as for their oppressors to hate 'niggers') and so on. These 'liberal' criticisms have to be considered far more suspect than the views they attack. After all, white liberals and the black middle class are among the prime targets for attack in black rap, so it is no accident that the far more powerful media resources of the liberals and middle class blacks have been devoted to putting rap down - even in the Washington Post and the Village Voice. When the enemy gets mad at you, you must be on target. Black rap is sometimes very much on target. Which is why every white liberal who criticises rap on these grounds load the dice in their own favour. It is no accident that black rappers put their foot in it most often when shooting off at the mouth in interviews with journalists. The journalist has the upper hand there, misquotes and practised skills with the media and all. Nor is it any accident that black rappers get revenge by putting down those same journalists in rhymed couplets with a funky blackbeat from record or stage, a medium where they have some control and where their audience is with them.

When black rappers step out of line, there are others in the black rap music community to try to rectify things. This musical genre started with get-down party lyrics, mostly bragging about fictitious wealth and sexual prowess. A lot of it is still at that kind of tabloid level. Yet at the other end, others are raising it to a fine art of avant garde communication where ideological critiques and stylistic innovations feed off each other. Hence one cannot judge an individual record as sexist or racist, which it may well be, and pretend that it says anything about rap as a whole. One has to consider it as a whole, as a media, first; as a series of round bits of coded plastic second.

Of course, one can't pretend to quarantine black from white. Indeed, most sophisticated black rap also rejects that, and wants to engage creatively with white culture, but (here's the big difference) on its own terms. Public Enemy are one of the most avant garde and interesting acts in rap, or in art in general, for that matter. If they want to say:

"Elvis was a hero to most. But he never meant shit to me. Straight up racist that sucker was. Motherfuck him and John Wayne", then they are guaranteed to offend a lot of people, but from their point of view, they're damned right. Trickier still: they are actually inviting white liberals to attack them for views which they know to be provocative. Criticise them and you are falling into a trap they've marked out for you in advance. They want to convince young ghetto blacks that the black community needs political and cultural autonomy, that you can't trust white liberals or even the black middle class sometimes, and they use a novel tactic to do it: they make themselves literally into a public enemy.

Their music has a double code which serves a dual purpose. In the first place, it is music to bait white liberals. The ideological hook is a counter to white supremacism which comes ambiguously close to flipping it over into its opposite: black supremacism. This ambiguous message is backed up with an aggressive theatricality, involving paratroop-style bodyguards with prop Uzi machine guns. This stylistic militancy gets Public Enemy into a lot of trouble. Which is pretty much the idea. The vague assertion of black supremacy brings on a backlash which unites white liberals and white racists in the one camp, if for very different reasons. The spectacle of white distaste, anger and opposition to Public Enemy forms a part of the message, the other message, for the other audience: the black audience.

White critics can be forgiven for forgetting that there is this other audience. The thing about white liberalism is that it likes to think everything can be reduced to the same paradigm. Public Enemy want to expose the fact that white liberalism is anglo-centric and far from universal. Not that white liberals are listening, of course. They are too busy legislating, in the literal and figurative senses of the word. Hence the white outrage at Public Enemy forms part of the message. The actual records and performances at the heart of all this are only a catalyst, or better yet, a scintillator.

The image of themselves which Public Enemy propose is refuted in white liberal discourse. This, of course, can be read as a positive attribute. The unacceptability of Public Enemy to white liberals is, in fact, the basis of their legitimacy. The more white liberals reject them, the more they bounce back, their popularity buoyed with a certain black audience.

Rather than assume universal principles exist for communication between different communities and identities, Public Enemy expose the real inequities in cultural resources and legitimacy, and white bias in liberal assumptions. Universal communication is a goal, not a premise with Public Enemy, which is as it should be.

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Chaos theory is all the rage - from greenhouse to computers, to the ALR office, nothing is safe. But John Banks offers a touch of caution...

Chaos theory is the trendy scientific idea of our time. It is the word on everyone’s lips, and it is being discovered in all manner of disparate phenomena, from the unreliability of our daily weather forecasts to the beating of our hearts.

Unfortunately, it is also being found in all manner of places where it probably doesn’t exist, and being looked for in all manner of places where it probably doesn’t make sense to look. In most cases, these misapplications are undoubtedly the result of innocent misunderstanding of recent insights into chaos, of over-enthusiasm, or of misguided views about the nature of the phenomena under examination. Some abuses may be less innocent.

Discoveries in various fields of science during the past 30 years have brought to light the ubiquity of physical and biological systems that violate the doctrine of the ‘clockwork universe’ which entered the discourse of the sciences during the 17th and 18th centuries. Perhaps the most explicit statement of this doctrine is to be found in the work of the 18th century French mathematician Pierre Simon de Laplace:

An intellect which at any moment knew all the forces that animate nature and the positions of the beings that comprise it, if this intellect were vast enough to submit its data to analysis, could condense into a single formula the movement of the greatest bodies of the universe and that of the lightest atom: for such an intellect nothing could be uncertain; and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes.

This most extreme variant of deterministic materialism lost considerable ground during the early part of this century with the advent of quantum physics, premised as that is upon the uncertainty principle: the impossibility of knowing with certainty either the position or velocity of a subatomic particle at any given point in time.

If quantum physics challenged determinism at the level of Laplace’s lightest atom, the new discoveries concerning chaos bring the challenge to bear throughout the rest of the spectrum. Instances of chaotic behaviour arise in systems ranging from the large scale like planetary motion through the dynamics of animal populations and the weather right down to human scale systems and smaller. More importantly, the recent findings raise fundamental questions about the notions of predictability and determinism which earlier generations of scientists could afford to ignore.

Complementary to the notion of the ‘clockwork universe’ during the past three centuries has been the assumption that deterministic systems specified by known and relatively simple sets of rules must necessarily behave in relatively simple and predictable ways. But many such simple deterministic systems have turned out not to be quite so simple after all. Simple sets of rules can, as we now know, give rise to geometric objects which are far from simple and to all sorts of complex and unpredictable behaviour.

It is such dynamical systems that the evocative title of chaotic has been given. They all have one feature in common: they involve a process of change over time, hence the name dynamical. Many of the natural processes we see day to day fit the bill: plant growth, changing weather patterns, the processes of erosion, fluctuating animal populations, the motion of celestial bodies, the growth of snow crystals - to name but a few.

The challenge to traditional notions of predictability stems from the feature of chaotic systems known as sensitive dependence on initial conditions. What this means is that the long-term behaviour of the system can be radically altered by even the slightest variation, no matter how small, in the starting conditions. Consequently, it is impossible in principle to measure the starting conditions with sufficient accuracy to provide for reliable long-term predictions in such systems.

One of the most important implications of all this is that the apparent disorder we see around us may well be the result of simple deterministic rule-governed systems. The apparent chaos has always been there but now, instead of seeing it as the outcome of complex interactions between different systems, or the result of external influences upon a simple system, we are invited to see it as an outcome of the dynamics of the system itself. This signals a significant change in the way in which we view complexity. We now have enough knowledge of mathematical models where chaos is present to expect that this type of complexity is very widespread indeed, so
that when we are confronted with complex behaviour, we cannot jump to the conclusion that there must be complex causes.

Although discoveries of this kind have been coming to light for at least 30 years now, they have only entered public consciousness during the last two or three. This has been due in large part to the eloquence of American science journalist James Gleick's popular account of these developments (Chaos: Making a New Science [1988]), and the spate of popular books and magazine articles which have followed. Aiding and abetting this rise to fame has been the spectacular computer-generated imagery of fractals. These often organic looking and always incredibly complex forms can be thought of as the geometric counterpart of chaotic behaviour. They are the geometric structures which typically arise in chaotic systems, and, like the systems themselves, their bewildering complexity is usually generated by a few very simple rules.

With this meteoric rise to scientific stardom have come, perhaps not surprisingly, a few problems. The publicists of chaos must take their share of the blame for many of the misunderstandings which have arisen. As John Merson pointed out recently in The Independent Monthly (June 1990), there is a certain recklessness about taking a term with a range of quite powerful and emotional connotations in everyday language, turning it into a mathematical definition, and then reinjecting it into popular discourse with the expectation that the new meanings intended by mathematicians will stick. There is a real dilemma here. If mathematicians simply invent new words for what they find or invent, it is almost impossible to communicate their findings to a popular audience already alienated by our culture's mystification of science and particularly of mathematics. On the other hand, the recycling of somewhat sensational terms like 'chaos' to describe mathematical discoveries invited misunderstanding and extension of the new ideas beyond all reasonable bounds.

Some apparently fail to see the problem here. I have recently seen articles which attempt to sort out the confusion by cautioning, somewhat condescendingly, against 'colloquial'

interpretations of the word. This is the height of arrogance: having commandeered your word, we scientists will now dictate its proper 'scientific' usage to you, and tell you that your everyday untutored notion of chaos was really very silly.

The most straightforward misapplications have resulted from the assumption that wherever there is apparent disorder, there is a chaotic dynamical system. There is simply no justification for this view. While techniques do exist for analysing apparently random data to determine whether this is the case, and to attempt to reconstruct a representation of the underlying system, they are by no means conclusive, and they do not establish the mechanisms which drive the system. The latter task requires detailed concrete analysis of each case. The existence of apparent disorder merely tells us that it might be worth investigating the possibility of chaos, provided always that we are looking at a system where this makes sense.

In the sphere of the social sciences the wisdom of applying these notions of chaos has to be viewed with some
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scepticism. It really only makes sense to attempt to analyse social phenomena from the dynamical systems point of view under the assumption that social systems obey the same types of deterministic rules as natural systems. This assumption is at best questionable and at worst a symptom of the desire by some schools of social science to emulate slavishly the norms of physical science, despite the obvious fact that social phenomena are radically different from those studied in the physical sciences. It is to be hoped that the current fad for chaos does not seduce too many social scientists into making fools of themselves. Thankfully, those on the Left in the social sciences tend to be sensibly sceptical of new wonder technologies in their fields of study.

There is potential for more deliberate and cynical attempts to use these ideas to confuse scientific debate in certain fields. Discoveries about the inherently chaotic character of weather systems are a case in point. Attempts to discredit greenhouse effect projections from this point of view may appear plausible at first sight. They invite us, however, to make the unwarranted assumption that because we appear to have no hope of making accurate weather forecasts beyond a few days into the future, we have no hope of saying anything meaningful about long-term climatic changes. This is analogous to saying that because you cannot predict the daily maximum temperature for Canberra on July 14, 1995, there is no reason to believe that Canberra will experience colder weather in July 1995 than in January 1995.

In fact, the issues involved in predicting long-term climatic trends are quite different from those involved in making weather forecasts. In projections of long-term climatic trends, one is interested in predicting the bounds within which the weather system will operate as some outside factor varies: in this case, the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. From those bounds one can hope to make statistical predictions about the system's average behaviour, which is precisely what is necessary for the purposes of making projections about the likely economic and environmental consequences of the greenhouse effect.

I am not claiming here that we can make accurate long-term predictions about climatic change. It might well turn out that the models used for this purpose are chaotic after all. Nonetheless, we should be wary of attempts by those with a vested interest in downplaying the greenhouse problem, to extrapolate from known chaotic phenomena in weather systems to the idea that long-term trends are beyond analysis. We should also be wary of excuse-making in other areas like economics, where the temptation is to say that because exact predictions cannot be made, attempts at government intervention in the economy are doomed to failure. As far as I know, the New Right hasn't tried this one on yet, but I wouldn't put it past them.

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