

In the 17 years that hip-hop has gone from an underground art form to a Madison Avenue commodity, I've graduated from high school and college, witnessed the death of my grandfather, gotten married and lost a head of hair. In other words, I've grown up and become a man. And now I have a son.

Raising a child in the hip-hop era is difficult—at least in part because of the complexity of the music, its message and the culture that has developed around it.



photography Mpozi Mshale Tolbert

## Hip-Hop Pop

by Joseph L. Lewis III

from conservatives for years; I don't want to blame rap for our country's and black folks' problems. (A Young Republican I ain't!) Violent songs aren't solely the domain of rap, and sexual lyrics are nothing new. I can remember how, as a teenager, I wanted to try a dose of Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing."

In fact, I've gotten some satisfaction from seeing rap—once a street art—evolve and take a position of leadership in the music industry. But that feeling has been reduced to fear because, in addition to having a "slammin' beat," hip-hop today has a violent, sexual component that I don't want my 12-year-old son, Jared, to listen to. (Impossible, I know.)

Hip-hop music (some, not all) suggests that it's cool to have a gun, while there are more African-American men in the criminal justice system than in colleges. I've listened to songs in which sisters profess that having sex for money and status is the thing to do; meanwhile, our community is suffering disproportionately from HIV and AIDS.

The hip-hop message goes counter to how I was conditioned to achieve. I was taught that the way to "make it" in

In many ways, it pains me to condemn hip-hop. The music has been getting a bum rap

this society is to speak correct English, go to school and work hard. Hip-hop, on the other hand, says that you don't have to speak correctly or go to school; all you need is a hit record to "get paid."

Hip-hop says one thing. Reality—at least my view of it—says another. As a father, what should I say? I don't have time for theoretical discussions about hip-hop. I have to make some practical decisions about how to raise my son in this culture.

Jared tells me he's able to discern what's good and bad about the music. And, he says, "Just because rap has a lot of sex and violence doesn't mean that kids are going to go out and do exactly what the record says."

His current good sense is what I hold on to. But he's only 12 now, and all I can do is hope that our familial effort will be enough to thwart the constant bombardment of negative lyrics and video images.

So, I've literally put it in the hands of God and my son. I've come to understand that, like most parents, all I can do is my best, because this hip-hop thing is new and complex. And, to paraphrase a little "flava" from the past, I don't know if I should believe the hype or fight the power. But I do know it's like a jungle raising a kid right now and it makes me wonder how I keep from going under.

Joe Lewis writes frequently for **HealthQuest**.