

While Kanye West Woos the DNC, Other Rappers Say F-ck the System

Andrew Kirell
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On Saturday afternoon, legendary rapper Kanye West appeared at a Democratic Party fundraiser headlined by President Obama. The whole scene was reportedly intimate: West performed a few of his biggest hits, and the president delivered a joke-laden speech, taunting the emcee for his tongue-in-cheek 2020 run.

While our future President Yeezus may find it in his best interest to shack up with Team Blue like fellow rap titan Jay Z, plenty of other rappers have gone the opposite way: No, not into the arms of the dreaded Republican Party, but towards a vocal distrust of partisan politics and all things Washington.

Consider it a throwback to the days when hip-hop wasn't a tool for suit-and-tie ideologues to seem cool and in touch with young voters; before bass-heavy club bangers supplanted the work of socially conscious, populist acts like Public Enemy and A Tribe Called Quest; before big-name performers like will.i.am and Common lent their talents to help get a politician elected.

Perhaps the most famous example is Big Boi, the deep-voiced half of celebrated Atlanta duo OutKast. In 2012, he revealed that he had bucked the trend of rappers lining up behind Obama by voting for Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson. (He has also tweeted supportive comments about Cato Institute and *Reason* magazine, two non-partisan libertarian institutions.)

"I have nothing against the president at all, he's a nice guy, but, it's just, the things that [he's] standing on right now just didn't agree with me," the rapper told HuffPost Live before suggesting Obama is in the pocket of corporate cronies.

Around the same time, Big Boi explained to Pitchfork that "I ain't on nobody's team" and that "it ain't just all about who's black or who's white or who's Republican or Democrat." He also noted his disappointment with Obama's civil liberties record (citing the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act) and mentioned that he was upset with R&B singer Mary J. Blige for sneaking in a celebratory line about Obama on their 2008 collaborative single "Sumthin's Gotta Give."

"On my damn record," Big Boi grouched. "I had a problem with it. I'm not pro-government at all, I'm pro-people."

Another gruff-voiced emcee, Killer Mike, has popularized an even more ambivalent tone towards Beltway politics. As one half of blockbuster duo Run the Jewels, Mike has risen to fame on the strength of his no-holds-barred lyrics about the crooked legislators, cops, and corporations

that seemingly engineer war, racial strife, and political trickery. “I don’t trust the government and I don’t trust the church,” he frequently proclaims during intense live performances.

On his 2012 solo single “Reagan,” Mike called Obama “just another talking head telling lies on teleprompters,” lumping him in with Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and the Bushes as the next in a line of politicians perpetuating a system of endless war for profit.

Further eschewing the 21st century stereotype that popular rappers must fall in line with feel-good white liberal politics, Mike has publicly mentioned his support for school choice reform, his National Rifle Association membership, and, by extension, his support for arming more citizens in the wake of the Charleston church shooting that left nine African Americans murdered.

Alternative hip-hop star Lupe Fiasco made waves when he slammed Obama over Israel: “Gaza Strip was getting bombed / Obama didn’t say shit / That’s why I ain’t vote for him,” the Chicago-based emcee said on 2011 single “Words I Never Said.” A few months later, he told CBS News that Obama is a “terrorist” for allowing (and occasionally aiding) violence abroad.

Up-and-coming Long Beach rapper Vince Staples had similarly harsh words for the president last year, when he called Obama a “house nigga” for preserving a political system that benefits the wealthy and neglects the ghetto.

“I never vote for presidents,” Staples asserted on his breakthrough LP, *Summertime ‘06*, released earlier this summer. “The presidents that change the hood is dead and green.”

Likewise, Compton phenom Kendrick Lamar has defiantly compared the Democrats and the GOP to street gangs, with Obama as part of the problem.

“From Compton to Congress, set trippin’ all around / Ain’t nothin’ new, but a flu of new Demo-Crips and Re-Blood-licans,” he rapped on “Hood Politics” earlier this year. “They give us guns and drugs, call us thugs / Make it they promise to fuck with you / No condom, they fuck with you / Obama say, ‘What it do?’”

This is not to suggest that all these artists have entirely disassociated themselves from mainstream politics. In fact, both Big Boi and Killer Mike have expressed support for a current Democratic candidate—albeit one who doesn’t really belong under that label.

“I’m for Bernie Sanders,” Big Boi said last month, “he’s with prison reform and things like that.” Similarly, Mike signed onto a list of celebrities endorsing the insurgency candidate. “I cannot support another Clinton or Bush ever,” he tweeted.

Support for the Vermont senator’s run against powerhouse Wall Street-approved candidates like Clinton absolutely reflects a long-standing frustration with the current state of politics (and, in effect, President Obama’s two-term administration).

You definitely won't see any of these guys at a thousand-dollar-a-ticket Democratic fundraiser anytime soon—unless, perhaps, Sanders gets the nomination. But, in the event that happens, consider the system as we know it entirely in flux.