This Ain’t Funny So Don’t You Dare Laugh

navigating the interplay of hip-hop and humor

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It was the late eighties and hip-hop’s Golden Age was in furious swing. Public Enemy unleashed the Black Nationalist blitzkrieg It Takes a Nation of Million to Hold Us Back in 1988. One year later N.W.A. released the paint-peeling street crime anthems of Straight Outta Compton. National newsmagazines still felt the need to warn of rap’s unholy social consequences. Meanwhile, defenders were quick to trumpet hip-hop’s social relevance: Chuck D famously described rap as “black CNN,” and KRS-One was one of many to champion hip-hop’s potential as a conduit to black history, explaining in no uncertain terms why “You Must Learn.”

Love it or hate it, rap was supposed to be serious business. No laughing matter. Maybe a menace to society. Perhaps an urban missive or a vessel of race pride. But its public face didn’t seem particularly funny.

Meanwhile, tugging from the other direction was a welcome dose of levity. Here was California’s Digital Underground, updating George Clinton’s outré sense of humor for hip-hop kids. DU’s public face was the Pinocchio-schmozzed clown Humpty Hump, a nasally, borderline minstrel hybrid of Harlequin and pimp. There was Long Island’s De La Soul, their joie de vivre propelled by goofball mad scientist producer Prince Paul. De La’s fierce consciousness and conscience fed their own form of nonviolent street cred (and spearheaded the fertile Native Tongues crew of A Tribe Called Quest, the Jungle Brothers and others), showing that levity doesn’t have to mean political disconnection. Biz Markie made the music with his mouth and plaintively warbled, off-key, about heartbreak and the best friend syndrome. This wasn’t got-packing rap. It wasn’t concerned with raising awareness of racism or urban poverty, or rekindling the flames of Black Nationalism. Some of it was created as party music. Some of it, particularly the Native Tongues output, was determined to raise political or Afro-centric consciousness, though never at the expense of a certain lightness of spirit and bounce in the step. All of it was proud to be funny. It didn’t demand to be taken seriously. In a genre and a culture known for macho posturing and tales from the dark side, this was laugh rap.

So how do we reconcile these two strains of rap? The task requires zooming in on that frequently queasy intersection where rage and laughter
can coexist in the same musical genre, the same track, or even the same couplet, bringing humor face to face with social consciousness in much the same way as the work of comedians like Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor, Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle. Hip-hop mines the gold of black humor traditions with the same tenacity and creativity as literature and film, using the disarming aural devices of enticing beats and rhymes to create sensa-
tions unavailable on the written page or the screen. Yet the intersection of hip-hop and humor has rarely received a discriminating visit. It’s a lot easier to sell a smoking gat or a model’s jiggling anatomy than to celebrate humor.

The greatest and most obvious source of hip-hop humor is lyrical. The mother wit of black humor’s Holy Trinity—the dozens, toasts, and signifying—trickles through hip-hop subgenres with little discrimination. You can’t have rap skills without a way with words, and you can’t talk about rap wordplay without acknowledging hip-hop’s debt to hundreds of years of black humor traditions practiced from cotton fields to street corners, from vaudeville stages to comedy clubs.

When The Pharcyde rips into “Ya Mama,” a can-you-top-this maternal capfest and the best of many comedy riffs on the 1992 gangster antidote Bizarre Ride II: The Pharcyde, they’re reflecting and extending the rich tradition of verbal street corner jousting known as the dozens. As D. L. Cohn writes, the dozens encompass “a form of Rabelaisian banter engaged in by two or more Negroes...Aspersions after aspersions are cast by each on the mammy of the other.” “Mama jokes,” a staple of black communities from the mother continent of Africa to the great urban African American migrations of the twentieth century, are as old as the Diaspora. They can still start fist fights, but the only natural reaction is laughter when the Pharcyde chants that “Ya mama got a glass eye with a fish in it.” (Or, if you want to stay in the dozens spirit: “Let’s get off moms. I just got off yours.”)

When De La Soul raps around pleasures of the flesh on the sexually charged “Buddy” they’re indulging in the time-honored tradition of signifying (“For the lap Jimbrowski must wear a cap/Just in case the young girl likes to clap.”). Black folklorist Roger Abrahams notes signifying’s “propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point.” The humor derives from what’s just out of reach, from what can’t, or won’t, be said, and from the tension between the sly and the explicit.

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“Jimbroski must wear a cap” is a lot cleverer than “gotta wear a rubber,” just as “the young girl likes to clap” is a lot funnier than “she has v.d.”; wordplay, always a staple of hip-hop, here massages the act of applause (or “the clap”) into a sexual innuendo. By rapping around the subject, De La Soul transcends what might otherwise come off as mere profanity with a verbal slight of hand, and they maintain an unthreatening tone that invites laughter, matches their general persona, and fits the name of this specific song. After all, who’s afraid of a buddy?

Without toasting—the epic narrative street poems celebrating the exploits of hustlers—we wouldn’t have Schooly D’s “Saturday Night” or Ice T’s “6 ‘N the Morning,” not to mention most of Jay-Z and Big Daddy Kane’s catalogs. The toasts can be seen as lengthy, rhymed boasts usually swapped
among groups of black men looking to top one another, as in a battle rap session. They pit conquest for the black survivor against the violent doom due The Man. In hip-hop, Jay-Z's hit “99 Problems” directly mirrors the classic toast “The Sinking of the Titanic,” in which the doomed ship’s captain tells the black Stoker Shine about the “99 pumps to pump the water out.” Shine, of course, swims to safety as most of the rich white Titanic passengers perish like Kate and Leo. Jay-Z, who posits himself as a variation on the “bad nigger”-type also common to black folklore, is content to talk back and assert his rights to the white cop who has pulled him over for DWB (Driving While Black).

But no lyrics, rap or otherwise, can reach their comedic potential divorced from music. Sound is crucial to enjoying this relatively recent addition to the black oral tradition, which means beats are every bit as important as rhymes, and what’s said is only as important as how it’s said. What makes a sound funny? The answer can be tricky though sometimes it’s obvious: when Humpty-Hump (né Gregory Jacobs, aka Shock G) hums a little of that bass groove in the middle of “The Humpty Dance,” the gesture guarantees a guffaw, not in the least for its twisted take on beat-boxing (which in itself reflects Henri Bergson’s comic theory of “mechanical inelasticity” layered over human suppleness).

Then there’s the minstrel-flavored kazoo riff that busts in on the second half of De La Soul’s “Bitties in the BK Lounge” (a dozens-flavored battle of the sexes set in a fast food restaurant). And that impossibly high-pitched, bendable synth noise, sampled from The Ohio Players’ “Funky Worm,” that kicks off N.W.A.’s “Dopeman?” Why is that funny? How can you tell? When does a wordless noise, like the click-and-thump bass interludes that bridged the scenes of Seinfeld, become a source of amusement?

My hope is to engage this and other questions by looking at hip-hop humor’s evolution through three different eras. We start with a master storyteller of hip-hop’s formative years, Slick Rick. A hybrid of stand-up comic and narrative master, Rick taught rap how to keep us on the edge of our seats, to see what happens next. Think “Children’s Story,” the classic bedtime tale that offers a timeless lesson: crime doesn’t pay. Here we encounter the menace of “Dave the dopehead shooting dope/Who don’t know the meaning of water nor soap.” Delivering such quips in his London street patois, his gold tooth gleaming, Rick teamed with beat-boxing DJ Doug E. Fresh to layer boastful raps over a tragic tale.

From hip-hop’s Golden Age, a period that flourished through the late 1980s and stopped sometime in the 1990s (exactly when depends on whom you ask), we enlist the late Notorious B.I.G. Aside from possessing an elastic
flow and mastery of meter, Biggie best exemplifies the timeless and primal connection between violence and comedy that goes back to a man slipping on a banana peel, or the fatalistic escapades of the coyote and roadrunner.

Spitting cinematic crime vignettes with a surplus of style and personality, Biggie is among the countless rappers who raise a seldom explored hip-hop conundrum: how can a music known for being hard and grimy, that would seem to prove every argument waged against hip-hop’s misogyny and celebration of homicide, also serve as a fount of humor? Or, as Kanye West puts in on “Addiction”: “Why everything that’s supposed to be bad make me feel so good?”

Finally, we have Dave Chappelle, representing what could be called the post-hip-hop generation. Though a comedian and not a rapper, Chappelle made hip-hop a frequent subject of humor on his short-lived Comedy Central series Chappelle’s Show, which also featured weekly performances from rappers including Kanye West, Mos Def and The Roots. Chappelle, who delivered a full-on hip-hop fiesta in the documentary Dave Chappelle’s Block Party, is post-hip-hop in the sense that he can love the music and culture while maintaining an ironic distance from both. This sensibility presides in Chappelle’s Show’s barbed send-up of Puff Daddy’s Making the Band reality show, and in the recurring skit “When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong.”

Chappelle’s humor springs directly from hip-hop’s longstanding relationship with stand-up comedy. Def Comedy Jam is the most obvious example. The one-time HBO hit sprang from the creative loins of Russell Simmons and Def Jam, the label that made its bones by launching the likes of Public Enemy and LL Cool J. Here the connection between hip-hop and comedy made the leap from subtext to text as part of cable TV’s push to snare young viewers. With DJ Kid Capri spinning records in the wings and hosts including Martin Lawrence shouting out to the likes of Run DMC in the
audience, Def Comedy Jam brought a hip-hop attitude to stand-up, a combination of street kid bravado and giddy, Showtime-at-the-Apollo-style swagger. Jamie Foxx, Martin Lawrence, DL Hughley, and, appropriately, Dave Chappelle are just a few of the comedians who used Def Comedy Jam as a springboard to stardom. The series showed a keen understanding of the similarities between the MC, with his microphone and his rhymes, and the comedian, isolated on stage for all to see and hear, living and dying with his material and wits.

**Slick Rick, the Narrative Ruler**

Slick Rick was among hip-hop's first master storytellers; a narrative rapper whose best songs had a beginning, middle, and end. He didn’t just string together boasts and conquests (though his verses featured plenty of both). He wrote short stories from the street, some of them poignant, many of them crude in their chronic objectification of women; “Treat Her Like a Prostitute” certainly did nothing to advance the cause of hip-hop gender relations.

Ironically, Rick's crass side may provide the best example of how the right flow can turn the overtly offensive into the purely goofy. Put the lyrics to “Treat Her Like a Prostitute” or “Indian Girl (An Adult Story)” on paper and they come off as relentlessly juvenile at best, abrasively misogynistic at worst. However, as previously noted, hip-hop doesn’t exist on paper. Stir in Rick’s fluttering British accent, singsong delivery and use of multiple voices and identities (including the falsetto MC Ricky D, through whom Rick duels himself on “Mona Lisa”). Add the trademark eye patch and gold teeth. Presto—you end up with a comical contrast: the mack dandy, or the dirty clown.

Take “Indian Girl (An Adult Story),” a deep track on Rick’s best solo album, *The Adventures of Slick Rick* (1988). It’s actually kind of ugly: Man who thinks “no means yes” commits date rape after dinner. Not good. But wait: Why is Rick singing the “Davy Crockett” theme (“King of the Wild Frontier”)? And voicing the “Indian Girl” of the title, who goes by name of Running Rabbit? Why does he/she sound like an around-the-way girl with a thing for helium? Is that Rick crooning “In the Mood for Love?” Did the Indian chief just offer “soup and spaghetti” for dinner? As such details add up, what should by all accounts be offensive instead turns into a sort of X-rated Saturday morning cartoon that fits the album title to a T. You laugh despite your better instincts.

A similar contrast plays out on the album’s biggest hit, “Children’s Story.” This is a cautionary tale warning young whippersnappers to stay on the “straight and narrow.” It has drugs, violence, even a tragic ending. Yet the song takes the form of a bedtime story, the most innocent of narrative forms. Like “Mona Lisa” and “Indian Girl,” “Children’s Story” is told through
multiple voices, including the narrator, the kids, a young criminal, and a deep-voiced cop. Rick has the nerve to warn us, “This ain’t funny so don’t you dare laugh,” and in a sense he’s right: Children’s Story has undeniably tragic elements. But Rick’s nasal delivery, incongruously spinning a cops-and-robbers shoot-em-up to squealing youngsters at bedtime, creates a tension between form and content: A sad story of street crime takes on a different life when the light delivery doesn’t match the tragic outcome. The musicality of Rick’s voice and the song’s dance-ready beat transform the song’s impact from tragic to comic.

It’s no surprise that Slick Rick rose to fame alongside Doug E. Fresh before setting off for solo glory. Before Biz Markie hit the scene, Doug perfected the “human beat box” repertoire of clicks, grunts, and other gymnastics of the mouth also practiced by Darren Robinson of the Fat Boys (another seminal group of hip-hop jokesters). Rick and Doug made a perfect team of jesters on cuts like “La Di Da Di,” in which Rick addresses a magic “mirror, mirror on the wall” to assess his dopeness; and “The Show,” which makes its lack of seriousness known by copping the hook to the Inspector Gadget theme (speaking of Saturday morning cartoons). Between Doug’s noise bag and Rick’s singsong cast of characters, hip-hop listeners were hard pressed to keep a straight face.

But laugh rap, like hip-hop itself, was still in its adolescence when Slick Rick ruled. De La Soul was still around the corner, as was the rapper whose delivery and identity owe the most to Rick, Digital Underground’s Humpty-Hump. Then, in the early ‘90s, came hip-hop’s biggest—and we do mean biggest—talent of all. Hip-hop humor would never be the same.

Laughing ‘til it Hurts: The Notorious B.I.G.

A man slips on a banana peel and falls on his rear end. A cartoon roadrunner drops an anvil on the head of a cartoon coyote (for the umpteenth time). It’s not funny for the guy who didn’t see the banana peel, or for the coyote, who nonetheless lives to chase another day thanks to the magic of animation. But it’s funny to us.

The connection between violence and comedy is primal. It springs from multiple sources, including schadenfreude, the sadistic but somehow natural instinct to think “Better him than me,” or the humor of incongruity, in which violence erupts where and when you least expect it and grabs us, and its victim, by surprise.
In the case of the banana peel, we laugh because the poor sucker was so distracted, with his head off in the clouds somewhere, that he couldn’t see the seemingly benign but ultimately treacherous garbage right in front of him; and because it’s not us slipping on the peel. We laugh from a position of safety, which the subject of our laughter can’t share. Incongruity is the key factor for the poor coyote: what in the world is a roadrunner doing with an anvil? Why does it always come from ACME? And how does the coyote keep getting up to brush himself off?

These questions can help us navigate and demystify the violent comedy of hip-hop, of which there was no greater chronicler than the late Notorious B.I.G. Biggie’s best rhymes meld classical conceptions of violent comedy with traditional elements of black history and folklore, from slavery to spinning yarns on the back porch. His underrated sense of humor is both classical and culture-specific.

For starters, we must acknowledge the abjectness and irony that undergirds so much of Biggie’s humor. He could play the Mack Daddy as well as anyone in the game; as he reminds in a nimble pun on Craig Mack’s Flava in Ya Ear, “Niggas is mad, I get more butt than ashtrays.” But it’s the unlikelihood of Biggie’s romantic persona that makes such boasts work. Morbidly obese, skin as dark as night, he doesn’t fit any part of hip-hop’s conventional Casanova image. A lover on the bluntly titled skit “Fuck Me” describes him as a “black Kentucky Fried Chicken eating...Oreo cookie eating, chicken gristle eating, black greasy motherfucker.” One thinks of the title character in Precious, whose similar physical traits have led some critics to accuse her creator, the novelist Sapphire, of milking pathology for melodrama. The irony, of course, is that the Biggie persona makes ample size and deep blackness sexy. As he says on his romantic anthem, “Big Poppa,” “I got more Mack than Craig, and in the bed/Believe me sweetie I got enough to feed the needy.”

Biggie’s overweight lover persona may carry a degree of wish-fulfillment fantasy for listeners or even other rappers who have eaten themselves to unhealthy proportions; most four hundred-pound wordsmiths don’t achieve the fame and riches of Biggie. As usual this dark hip-hop humor has a potentially sharp and painful edge. But Biggie rarely makes it obvious; his charm and swagger allow us to vicariously savor the “T-bone steak, cheese eggs and Welch’s Grape” without lingering too long on consequences like those that befall Big Pun, another gifted rapper who traded on his own size before he reportedly topped out at close to seven hundred pounds and couldn’t tie his shoelaces upon his death in 2000. There’s nothing funny about that.

But Biggie manages to exude sex appeal, and he deftly plays off the incongruity of an enormous Casanova as a source of humor. In Notorious, the Hollywood biopic that does its best to soften up the Biggie persona, we see
the two sides of Biggie working a sort of “good cop, bad cop” routine on his wife, Faith Evans. After flying into a violent rage after hearing reports (likely false) of her dalliance with Tupac Shakur, he tries to win her back by making her laugh, which is how he won her affections in the first place. Here the double-edged, Hollywoodized Biggie, played by Jamal Woolard, fits the gastronomic description of the press agent played by Tony Curtis in The Sweet Smell of Success, offered up by his most vengeful client. He’s a cookie full of arsenic.

But to really peel back the layers of Biggie’s violent humor we must go to the source: his music. Start with “Gimme the Loot,” the second song on Ready to Die, the only album Biggie released before he was gunned down in Las Vegas in March 1997. The album is now canonized as a landmark of hardcore hip-hop’s existentially violent street realism.

“Gimme the Loot” begins with a lumbering boom-thwack beat, as if to announce the approach of something big. Sure enough here comes Biggie—times two. Playing a pair of brazen, bickering thugs, one resonant and cool, the other high in voice and attitude, Biggie layers into a two-man scene notable for its brutally frank description of street crime. How brutal? For one, it reminds us that Ice Cube wasn’t the only one that rapped about beating up pregnant women. Says Biggie: “I wouldn’t give a fuck if you’re pregnant/ Gimme the baby rings and the No. 1 Mom pendants”. Ready to Die earns its gangsta proper. So many, in fact, that it’s easy to forget its deserving recognition as a masterpiece of dark comic humor.

Biggie’s humor has roots in black folklore traditions, so often inextricably tied to imagery of and escape from violence. As Glenda Carpio illustrates in her book Laughing Fit to Kill, the shadow of slavery and its brutal impact on the black body looms large over black humorists from Charles Chesnutt to Dave Chappelle, who shock us into laughing at subjects ranging from reparations to Roots.

Biggie’s most incendiary songs have a nervy but guileless way of daring the listener not to laugh. Reacting to Biggie’s gallows humor can induce a panic of political incorrectness, or, in polite company, the wish for one of those Old South laughing barrels, which, as legend has it, stood in town squares and served as the public repository for black laughter. Most sentient hip-hop fans know the feeling: you’re driving along with the CD in the changer, chuckling at some wicked turn of phrase, when your conscience perks up: Why am I laughing at that?
Such is the case with “Gimme The Loot,” which might just drive you to giggle at the following exchange of criminal advice, between an Instructive Biggie and an Excitable Biggie, on the finer points of armed robbery:

Instructive Biggie: Word is bond, I’m a smoke him yo don’t fake no moves.
Excitable Biggie: What?!
IB: Treat it like boxing; stick and move, stick and move.
EB: Nigga you ain’t to explain shit.
I’ve been robbing motherfuckers since the slave ships,
With the same clip and the same four-five.
Two point-blank a motherfucker’s sure to die.

The money line—“I’ve been robbing motherfuckers since the slave ships”—works on multiple levels. We can read it in the tradition of the “laughing contests” sponsored by Zora Neale Hurston during her Southern folklore gathering excursions, in which residents delighted in the exaggerated exploits of John and the Massa tales. The idea of “robbing motherfuckers since the slave ships” presents a comical exaggeration of ruthlessness. The incongruity of a ’90s stick-up kid running amok through the Middle Passage also conjures potential revenge fantasies on the level of the time-traveling Player Haters who gunned Massa down on *Chappelle’s Show*.

The humor of the “slave ship” couplet is only heightened by Easy Mo Bee’s production, which strips away the bass line to leave a naked beat just
as the punch line is delivered, much as the original Bronx hip-hop DJs isolated break beats to set their crowds off. Sound doesn’t have to be funny to leave a comic impact; sometimes, it can step back just enough to give the verbal delivery enough room to work.

Still, if you laugh at the slave ship conceit you might want to do it under your breath. Any sentence that connects the words “robbing” and “slave ships” implicitly asks you to consider what was really robbed on that long intercontinental kidnapping. Dignity? Identity? Herein lies the verbal tension of the exchange. The mental image of a slave ship provokes plenty of adjectives: deadly, smelly, cramped, doomed, epically inhumane. “Funny” isn’t one of them. But when you connect the setting to the image of, say, The Wire’s Omar Little offering up the barrel of a shotgun with a smile, the incongruity becomes tragicomic. And that’s before you even consider the idea of a four hundred-year-old (and four hundred-pound) stick-up kid. Like Chappelle’s time-travelling Player Haters, this brutal passage manages to celebrate retribution and survival using humor as a substitute for any possible sentimentality.

Biggie’s wordplay shows an ample girth of irony. His rhymes conjure vivid images embedded in narratives about upward mobility (“Juicy”), romantic exploits (“Big Poppa”) and, yes, purse-snatching (“Gimme the Loot”). But “Gimme the Loot” is just a vignette; it’s practically a scene from a screenplay, in which the star plays both clearly defined lead roles—the brazen leader and the eager-to-please follower. These characters aren’t created in the writing so much as the performance. One second the split Biggies sound like thug buddies for life; the next they might be quarreling lovers (“Yes love, love your fucking attitude”) or opinionated coworkers caught in mid-beef. The tension between tone and deed could make a listener cringe, even as it makes the same listener laugh.

Biggie’s charm, best displayed on more romantic cuts like “Big Poppa,” can also convey a strong and unnerving side order of schadenfreude in his criminal-minded capers. For instance, once the split Biggies establish their comedic bona fides as bickering colleagues, they have softened us up for later, more overtly brutal passages:

    So go get your man bitch he can get robbed too
    Tell him Biggie took it, what the fuck he gonna do?

No one wants some innocent, chivalrous dude to get robbed defending his woman. But Biggie’s cleverness and gallows humor have already seduced us. We like him by now. He’s got a gun, but he’s also got jokes. And so, when it’s time for him to do the dirty work, we’re primed to laugh some more, or perhaps even cheer the big fella on, all the while harboring a guilty “better him
(and her) than me” sentiment. Here Biggie plays off the historical threat of annihilation in the black community, a kill-or-be-killed fatalism that he uses to non-comedic effect in the song “Everyday Struggles,” which has more in common with traditions of Robert Johnson and the blues than with humor: “I don’t wanna live no more/Sometimes I hear death knocking at my front door.” In hip-hop even a comedian can have a hellhound on his trail.

“Gimme the Loot” is also a prime example of Biggie’s storytelling skills. A master of painting vivid pictures and spinning yarns, his narrative chops have frequently earned the adjective “cinematic”; when you listen to a Biggie track you often feel like you’re watching a movie unfold. But he’s also working from a storytelling tradition closer to the city that predates cinema by many years, a tradition wherein weavers of folk wisdom and tall tales hold forth. In this sense Biggie descends from previous black communities urban and rural, from back porches to barber shops like the setting of the popular Ice Cube movies, where you can get a buzz cut and the latest dish and dozens from the community in one stop.

This is the spirit of “I’ve Got a Story to Tell,” a frequently overlooked gem from the posthumously released album Life After Death. “I’ve Got a Story to Tell” thrives on the tension between public and private black storytelling, or what Mel Watkins, in his black humor study On the Real Side, calls the outside and the inside. As Richard Pryor put it, black storytellers “have a way of telling you stuff and not telling you stuff,” depending on the intended audience. “I’ve Got a Story to Tell” tantalizes by laying the told next to the untold—and exploring hip-hop’s ability to blur such distinctions.

Here we find another set of split Biggases: the rapper, relating a slapstick story of thugging and loving to the listener, complete with sly beat and harp sample; and the social, yarn-spinning Biggie, telling the same story in non-rhyming form, to his buddies amid much laughter and signifying. In the first instance, Biggie performs in the publically accepted, highly profitable forum of rap music. This is the overtly performative take, the rap star version that runs about two-and-a-half minutes. Then, in the second take, he speaks directly to the rich history of black storytelling whose recent practitioners include the ever-toasting Rudy Ray Moore and Richard Pryor’s down-home folk raconteur, Mudbone.

“I could be wrong,” says Life After Death producer and A&R man Derrick “D Dot” Angelettie in “The Making of Life After Death.” “But I’ve never heard a rapper rap you a story and then tell you the whole story again without rapping.” Indeed, it’s not the story that makes “I’ve Got a Story to Tell” a classic of hip-hop’s violence/comedy marriage. The tale itself is pretty
straightforward, a variation of the Big Poppa ladies’ man legend laced with some plus-size criminal ingenuity. The magic is in the telling, or, rather, the dual telling.

Our antihero goes out partying with his latest lady friend, whose boyfriend happens to be in the NBA (or, as only Biggie could put it, “she get dick off a player from the New York Knicks”). She’s all over him, but once they commence to getting busy they hear the boyfriend walk in the front door. What’s a Big Poppa to do? Think fast, of course, and play the trickster. He ties the girl up, wraps a bandana around his face and turns his booty call into a stick-up, making off with $100,000 of the star athlete’s cash—and, more important, a dandy story to tell.

And so Biggie segues directly from the end of Take One (“Grab the keys to the five, call my niggas on the cell /Bring some weed I got a story to tell”) to the start of Take Two, a more casual affair that sounds like a master tale-teller chilling with his boys, who offer prompts and interjections that spur the storyteller on. We get the impression of a guy trying to impress his friends on the street corner. This Biggie could be a thugged-up version of the childhood neighbor recalled by Mel Watkins, who would “sit on his porch or in the local
barber shop or nearly anywhere and command an audience with outrageous stories.” The beat and the sample remain the same, but the rap is replaced by a colloquial, arrhythmic tone—from poetry to prose. The question is whether the purpose of the story switches with the intended audience. In the first section we listen as outsiders, or consumers. In the second section we listen as eavesdroppers privy to the unofficial, or insider, version.

The two stories in “Story” have clear differences. The rhyming story, or outsider version, is a public performance full of playful menace and one-upmanship: “I’m in his ass while he’s playin’ ‘gainst the Utah Jazz,” boasts Biggie in a witty false rhyme. Moments later, as the basketball-playing boyfriend enters the house unexpectedly, Biggie uses the silent space between beats (as he does in the “slave ship” passages of “Gimme the Loot”) to toss out an extemporaneous concern for keeping all of his limbs:

Now I’m like bitch you better talk to him
Before this fist put a spark to him
Fuck around shit get dark to him, put a part through him
Lose a major part to him, (arm, leg)

In this passage, aside from showing a playfully vulnerable side—enormous, gat-packing rapper takes time out to worry about his arms and legs—Biggie also massages and rides the beats-and-rhymes combination that forms the heart of every rap song. Then, in the next section, he flips the script by turning to the less formal, more colloquial style used among groups of friends, who don’t, unless in the middle of a cipher, rhyme when they talk to each other.

Now Biggie finds himself on a more intimate social platform and gives us the illusion of what it’s like to hang out in his inner sanctum back at the crib with his friends. The interactive tone is established immediately as Biggie introduces his story: “Yo man, y’all niggas ain’t gonna believe what the fuck happened to me.” (He’s not talking to us; we already know what happened). Now Biggie has a live audience, and, not unlike a stand-up comedian, he works with it. One of his buddies asks which Knicks player put his life in danger. Biggie: “One of those 6’5 niggas, I don’t know.” His explanation for the player’s return home is also a classic: “They must have been rained out or something,” a comment met by a communal masculine wooing. The smooth flow of the famous MC has been replaced by the casual banter used in a peer group, complete with varying inflections and emotional annunciations. We are now a part of the in-group.

As Biggie continues to break down his evening (“Had me scared, had me scared, I was shook Daddy—but I forget I had my Roscoe on me. Always. You know how we do”), his buddies pitch in with the kind of call-and-
response action you might hear, in more worshipful tones, on a Sunday morning at church: “Aight, aight.” “Ohhh, shit.” And in case we didn’t realize that we were now in a social situation, one of the friends offers a needling dose of “Told you so”: “I told you not to mess that sheisty bitch. Word to mother, I used to fuck with her cousin. You ain’t know that though.” In response we hear Biggie’s raspy laugh, then his brief description of his final, post-robbery act: “Two words—I’m out!” That earns a rousing round of “No doubt!,” followed by Biggie’s request to smoke some weed: “You got some la?” And then a final, affirmatively friendly “No doubt!” Story over. Time to indulge in another activity immortalized in another Biggie anthem: party and bullshit.

Like so many Biggie songs this one is laced with serious issues that haunt black people of both genders, including black-on-black crime and violence against women. And like so many Biggie songs, it uses narrative craft and imagination to create gallows humor. There’s a connection here between Biggie and Slick Rick that extends to countless other rappers as well. Artifice, in the form of narrative trickery, elastic beats, or off-the-cuff banter, is used to make the unpalatable—misogyny, robbery—more acceptable. The acts described in “I’ve Got a Story to Tell,” or in “Gimme the Loot,” carry a touch of Rick’s “Don’t you dare laugh” admonition. If described in plain language, without a catchy beat underneath, without the sense of verbal mischief, these deeds could be easily described as abominable. As recorded, however, what might be considered limited or offensive subject matter morphs into a queasy form of laughter. The impact of the words is transformed by the sound.

Let’s return to that narrative trickery. There’s a public story and a private story in “I’ve Got a Story to Tell,” but you could argue that both versions, despite their disparate tones and styles, are equally public. Yes, the second version is shared between Biggie and his boys; we’re not on the record hollering and hooting and laughing with the storyteller. But because both versions are on an album that has sold more than ten million copies, we are among the listeners. Because rap is not just a form of expression but a commodity, a multi-million dollar industry, even its private forms become public.

**Dave Chappelle and post-hip-hop humor**

**Dave Chappelle** was born in 1973; he came to prominence as a comedian in the ’90s. In recent parlor he would be, to borrow from Mark Anthony Neal’s conception of “post-soul” culture, a member of the post-hip-hop generation. He grew up with R&B, not rap, and he can look back at hip-hop’s peaks and valleys with a sense of ironic humor honed through generational distance.

This gives him a unique perspective, one shared by other recent hip-hop savvy comedians including Chris Rock. Like Rock, Chappelle shows a deep appreciation for and knowledge of hip-hop culture, which doesn’t keep him
from skewering its excesses and hubris. This duality sparked the two glorious seasons of his Comedy Central sketch comedy series, *Chappelle’s Show*. Here Chappelle could book the hottest hip-hop names around, including Kanye West, Common, and Eryka Badu, then turn around on the same episodes and deliver razor-sharp comedic critiques of hip-hop music and culture.

Though Chappelle’s most popular and best-known hip-hop send-ups focus on the minimalist histrionics of Atlanta rapper Lil’ Jon (“What?! “Yeeah!”), he takes on the hip-hop creeds of street cred and conspicuous consumption more directly in the recurring skit “When Keepin it Real Goes Wrong” and in his devastating spoof of Diddy’s MTV reality show, *Making the Band 2*. The former spoofs hip-hop’s humorless insistence on showing a tough front, or “keepin it real,” regardless of the possibly violent consequences. The latter takes aim at hip-hop’s cult of personality and oversized egos, personified by Diddy (played by Chappelle).

Every installment of “When Keepin it Real Goes Wrong” follows a similar pattern. Minding his or her business, behaving as a law-abiding citizen, a man or woman responds to a perceived slight as a personal insult and lashes out. The rationale? “I keeps it real.” By now “keeping it real” is a hoary trope of street life posturing, a means of asserting one’s ethnic and cultural authenticity in a white-dominated world. It suggests a reluctance to sell out, or go straight. But in Chappelle’s world, the stance has a way of backfiring and becoming unworthy of the effort.
Let’s look at the one “Keepin it Real” installment that features Chappelle himself. As a faux-documentary narrator tells us, he plays a well-to-do corporate player named Vernon Franklin, the youngest vice president in the history of his company. We see Vernon making his way through college and the business world, the announcer tells us Vernon’s success has ended “the cycle of violence and drug addiction that had plagued his family for generations.” This sets him up as a parody of the bootstrapping black Horatio Alger figure that has made his way out of the ghetto, a caricature that Chappelle also parodied on his show in a spoof of McDonald’s (or “Whack Arnold’s”) recruitment ads.

Then Vernon decides to keep it real, and this is when things go wrong. At the end of a business meeting Vernon’s white mentor offers an awkward compliment: “Vernon, you the man. Give me some skin.” Here Vernon pauses. He has a choice: he can either let the pathetic stab at hipness slide and resume his upward trajectory; or he can live by the hip-hop code and display a culturally-manufactured sense of authenticity. The off-screen narrator tells us that “in his heart of hearts he feels like an Uncle Tom” for getting along with his white coworkers. So he unleashes his inner gangsta on his unsuspecting mentor. “You better sit down bitch,” he demands, before barking like a dawg and name checking the Wu-Tang Clan. Not surprisingly, Vernon is fired and ends pumping gas at a filling station—“as real as it gets.”

Here the satire works on two levels. On the screen, Chappelle plays a businessman who commits career suicide by adopting the confrontational and stereotypical battle code of hip-hop culture. Then there’s Chappelle himself, who walked away from the show and left millions on the table after two highly successful seasons. Though his reasons are still unclear, it’s been widely reported that he felt uncomfortable with the kind of racial humor proscribed by the series’ white executives. You could say that, in walking away and leaving a pile of cash on the table, Chappelle decided to really keep it real.

If “When Keepin it Real Goes Wrong” lampoons hip-hop’s easily adapted code of honor, Chappelle’s spoof of Diddy and Making the Band 2 works as a barbed commentary on the self-mandated privileges and sense of entitlement enjoyed by hip-hop’s Ghetto Fabulous faction. Chappelle sets up his ambivalent, post-hip-hop identity by gleefully proclaiming, “My favorite TV show is coming back on the air.” He then sets out to mercilessly mock that very show and its famous master of ceremonies.

The targets are Diddy and Da Band, the aspiring rappers whom Diddy put through absurdist paces en route to a record deal in the show’s second and third seasons. Chappelle’s task is daunting, for Making the Band often seemed like a parody of itself. It’s tough to do anything but laugh when the up-and-coming rappers are sent walking from Manhattan to Brooklyn to fetch Diddy some cheesecake. But Chappelle still manages to up the ante. Just like the real Diddy, Chappelle’s taskmaster shuts down the recording studio when his protégés resort to infighting and pettiness. On Chappelle’s Show, however,
cheesecake just won’t do. Sitting in a luxurious terrycloth robe, Chappelle/Diddy lays down the law. “The only way I open the studio now,” he tells his charges, “is y’all gotta walk uptown to the Bronx and get breast milk from a Cambodian immigrant.” A Cambodian immigrant? “I only drink the finest breast milks.” Forget Cristal; this guy wants his mommy. Then comes the punch line. We cut to the boss drinking greedily from the second of two pint bottles of milk, its contents running down his chin. “That’s one hundred percent Cambodian,” he purrs. “It’s the real shit.” He then clinks the two milk bottles and sings his approval: “Breassst milk/You made my daayyy.”

The humor here is double-edged, and it once again shows Chappelle’s ability to mock that which he loves and knows intimately. Rap aficionados will recognize Diddy’s approval as a parody of the first lines in the remix of Craig Mack’s “Flava in Your Ear”: “Baaadd Boy/Come out and plaayyy” (an homage, in turn, to the 1979 New York gangland movie The Warriors). The Making the Band skit has added value for those who know hip-hop. It springs from the mind of a comedian who shows his love for hip-hop every time a guest artist comes on his show. Yet the skit is also scathing in its depiction of hip-hop’s elite echelon as spoiled, pampered, and out of touch. It’s the work of a post-hip-hop artist who can maintain ironic distance and satirize the more extreme elements in a culture of which he is a part.

**Conclusion: Still a laughing matter?**

So is hip-hop funny as of this writing? Or, rather, is it funny in any way it would want to brag about? The ever-visible Kanye West has become a cultural punch line for his bizarre awards show behavior and compulsive, self-absorbed Twittering. Interrupting a teen singing star’s coming-out party on national television may be funny-strange, but it isn’t particularly funny-ha-ha.

Meanwhile the underground spawns the likes of Soulja Boy, whose nursery rhyme style, exemplified by the club and jock favorite “Crank That,” provides the mischief of Slick Rick without any of the wit. Chappelle had endless fun mocking the monosyllabic stylings of Lil’ Jon, and in his typical double-edged style he brought the Dirty South rapper onto the show and in on the joke. Just think what kind of fun the reclusive comedian could have with Soulja Boy. (Come back, Dave!)

But hip-hop’s capacity for reinventing itself means it will never grow creatively stagnant. Pick a random couplet from the king of the hip-hop
world, Jay-Z, and you’re likely to uncover a verbal gem. On the new “D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune)” he even takes on the Soulja Boys of the world (“I know we facing a recession/But the music y’all making gonna make it the Great/Depression”). Anyone who has seen Get Him to the Greek knows Diddy can mock his own ego and excesses without the help of Dave Chappelle. The Mouse and the Mask, MF Doom and Danger Mouse’s 2006 swim through the Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim, provides hip-hop humor sans regret: a concept album dedicated to stoner cartoons.

Doom and Danger exemplify an absurdist strain in recent independent hip-hop, a willingness to embrace the nerdy without a heavy cloak of irony. Their antecedents include the early De La Soul, probably still the only crew to put a faux French lesson on wax (“Transmitting Live From Mars”). Cee Lo Green could be counted among their current kinfolk. The former Goodie Mob member has dressed as superheroes and Star Wars characters in appearances with his Gnarls Barkley partner Danger Mouse; more recently he released the sleeper hit of the summer in “Fuck You,” a poppy parody of a jilted lover’s lament.

So hip-hop can still bring the funny. These days, however, the laughs feel more than ever like the exception to the rule. Rare mainstream artists, like Jay-Z and like Lil’ Wayne, make cleverness seems as natural as breathing. But rap as a whole—or at least what’s available for a mass audience to hear—has lost much of that playful feeling, that evocation of old humor traditions and brazen invention of new ones. That feeling does more than just make us laugh. It also reminds us that hip-hop is an art form with deep cultural lineage—an art form whose mastery and innovation of comic forms deserves to be taken seriously.