

Police surveillance of rappers has broader civil rights implications

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By **LEONARD PITTS Jr.**
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Are Miami police spying on rap artists? And should it matter to you if they are?

How you answer the first question depends on who you choose to believe. According to a recent story by Herald reporters Nicole White and Evelyn McDonnell, police in both Miami and Miami Beach have been routinely tailing and surveilling rap performers who visit South Florida to work and play.

This was promptly denied by Miami Police Chief John Timoney.

However, the piece quotes some of his officers acknowledging their participation in the program. And the assistant police chief of Miami Beach unabashedly admits his department's spying. "We have to keep an eye on these rivalries," Charles Press said. All of which makes it difficult

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to take Timoney's denial at face value. At a minimum, it's clear that somebody with a badge is surreptitiously following rappers around.

Which returns us to the second question. Should you care?

I'm going to go out on a limb here and speculate that you are not, yourself, a rapper. Now, if you're reading this in the Jacuzzi in the back of your limousine surrounded by scantily clad women, then I am obviously in error and I apologize. But I'm going to assume that's not the case.

Indeed, far from being a rap star, maybe you're one of those folks of a certain age for whom rap is a territory only slightly less alien than Pluto. And twice as frightening.

I feel your pain. One of the reasons I quit being a music critic 10 years ago is that I found it increasingly difficult to appreciate the artistry of some young man cursing at me over a drum beat sampled from an old James Brown record. Not to mention the violence, always implied and sometimes celebrated in graphic detail in the lyrics of rap songs. Of course, violence is more than a lyric where rap is concerned. The music has been repeatedly stained with the blood of performers and hangers-on, of which the murders of Tupac Shakur and Christopher "The Notorious B.I.G." Wallace are but the most infamous examples.

Given all that, should you and I be troubled that police are spying on these guys?

Yeah, I think we should.

The problem is that police aren't surveilling people they suspect

of committing crimes or even people they suspect will commit crimes. Rather, they are surveilling an entire class. And how convenient that the vast majority of people in that class is young, male and black.

In other words, people the mainstream already finds frightening.

Beyond the issue of racial profiling of young black men, though, is the question of civil rights for all of us in these tenuous days post-Sept. 11. Days in which Muslim men are rounded up for no reason other than that they are Muslim men. Days in which the government refuses to account for the people it detains or even to provide them access to attorneys. Days in which the attorney general can order the local library to give him a list of the books you've been reading.

In other words, days that echo certain other days, dark days of Japanese internment, dirty tricks against Martin Luther King, spying on antiwar protesters, investigating John Lennon. Taken in context, the surveillance of rap stars seems of a piece with the civil rights erosions we have seen in recent years. Of a piece with the bad old days.

And maybe this is fine with you because you're not a rapper. Or because you're not Japanese or Muslim, not Martin Luther

King or John Lennon. Maybe you just want to feel safe and never mind the cost.


It's a common view, but a shortsighted one. And what a shame if civil rights must erode from beneath you, personally, before you understand that.

It's easy to ignore the cost when someone else is paying. But eventually, this bill comes around to us all.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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