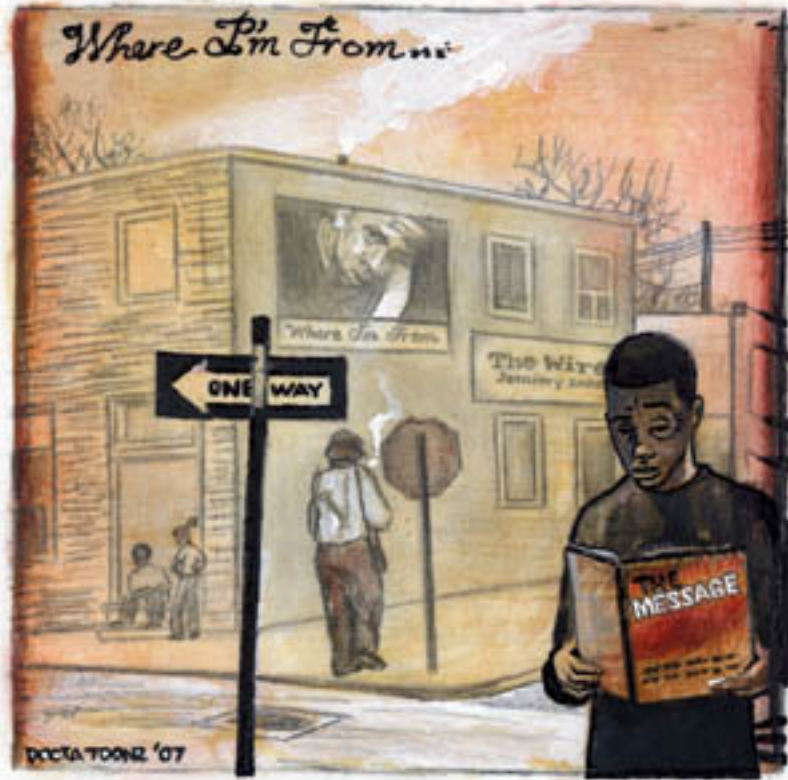


Where I'm From

Jay-Z Precipitates A Baltimore Rumination In This Excerpt From *The Message: 100 Life Lessons From Hip-Hop'S Greatest Songs*



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Felicia Pride | Posted 10/24/2007

The Message: 100 Life Lessons from Hip-Hop's Greatest Songs by Felicia Pride

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"WHAT DO YOU THINK about *The Wire*?"

That's the first question fired my way when I tell people that I'm from Baltimore in my hometown accent. That is, if I don't get the look of pity that is usually followed by "I'm sorry to hear that."

Don't shoot me. I actually don't watch the show. Not because it's a raw and perhaps honest homage to the drug infestation of Charm City, but because I don't have HBO. Even if I'm honest about my ignorance of "the best show on TV," folks are thirsty to know if Baltimore is really as criminally minded as it's portrayed on television.

Yes and no.

Here's the "no" side. The relationship between home and hip-hop is a bond that is hard to break. It's from hip-hop that I learned to be proud of where I'm from despite my hometown's national reputation. Baltimore raised my mother and my father, my cousins, and my aunts and uncles. I was

born in Baltimore and spent my formative years living, growing, and developing in the city's surrounding areas. It is a chunky slice of who I am. And it motivated me to be who I am today.

Superficially speaking, I learned many things from Baltimore: Don't hang around the parking lot after the club. Folks really do pop trunks and grab tools to settle beefs. Don't stand around a fight waiting to be stabbed-- it really does happen. Getting your hair done weekly is crucial to your womanhood. And there's nothing wrong with a little neon green or orange in one's wardrobe.

I spent many Sundays cruising Druid Hill Park trying to get guys' phone numbers. My cousin and I would then head over to Eutaw Street for a chicken box and a half-and-half--a tooth-decaying, sugary mix of iced tea and lemonade. I love Old Bay seasoning, use it in my fried chicken, and do eat the yellow "mustard" in steamed crabs. If you throw on club music, our homegrown genre, I will turn into another woman. The music's bass will make me convulse. Don't be frightened. I'm just dancing, B-more-style.

Here's the "yes" part. Charm City has swallowed too many of my family members whole. Its daily news coverage always seems to include a murder. In this way Baltimore is like many places across the country, but because it's where I'm from, death hits home like Barry Bonds. Jay-Z's "Where I'm From" is an extended shout-out to his Brooklyn. Over a nasty beat that makes you squint your eyes while bobbing your head, Jay brought his borough front and center, reppin' BK to the fullest, putting his hood on the map, and illuminating vivid details of a place where "ain't nothin' nice."

Jay doesn't reside in Marcy Projects anymore. I left Baltimore in 2001. I had to leave to live. To dream. In Baltimore I stopped growing. I stopped caring. I wanted more, like African-Americans who left the rural South for Northern jobs in the 1800s.

Many times we have to leave our hometowns to achieve our dreams. We have to leave to go to school. We have to leave for better opportunities. And very often the world wants us to forget about "back home." If there is anything that hip-hop has shown, it's that where we're from will always be a part of us, whether you visit your block monthly or you haven't been home to your West Indian island in five years. You can keep it alive by representing lovely.

Representing, however, isn't just throwing your hands in the air and waving them like you just don't care when the club DJ shout-outs your city. Nor does it require you to go to great lengths to prove that your hood is still in you. It's unnecessary and silly to prove one's Caribbeanness, innercityness, or suburbanness.

Representing lovely is being in a position to help those "back home." I'm writing to get to that place. And maybe one day I'll create a "Where I'm From" in book form for Baltimore. *The Wire* is only a small part of my birthplace's story.

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