



In Our View: Jam Master Jay Never Lost Touch With His Roots

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By Walter F. Fields,

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RunDMC Member's Shocking Murder A Metaphor For Modern Life, Not The Rap Music Industry

The tragic shooting death of hip-hop artist Jason "D.J. Jam Master Jay" Mizell, of the group Run-DMC, will be quickly seized upon by critics of the rap genre as a further sign of the violence that they believe this urban music form breeds. This reaction is unfortunate and disrespects the memory of an artist whose was life contrary to the violence that ended it. If anything, his untimely passing may now motivate a new sense of political activism within the hip-hop community to confront gun violence.

By all accounts Mr. Mizell was well respected in the music industry, among peers and in his community. As the spin master for Run-DMC, Mizell was part of a pioneering trio who, along with the Sugar Hill Gang, brought rap to mainstream audiences. Though in the background supporting rap artists Run (Jason Simmons) and DMC (Darryl McDaniels), it was the beats of Jam Master Jay that came to personify the group and make them hip-hop royalty. The group was the first rap act to appear on MTV and the first to have an album go platinum.

They were musical pioneers who never lived on their laurels. From the late 1980's Run-DMC experimented with their art and along the way recorded some memorable music. Their 1986 collaboration with Aerosmith in remaking the heavy metal group's hit "Walk This Way" demonstrated the power of hip-hop to transcend conventional definitions of music. It also introduced Run-DMC, and rap, to a white audience and paved the way for the success of an artist like Eminem.

Always the innovators, they also set a fashion trend by bringing street gear to Main Street. No sneaker manufacturer's marketing campaign can do what Run-DMC's "My Addidas" did for sports footwear. Clever, catchy and above all things, fun, Run-DMC made it alright to sport a Kangol and keep your Addidas untied. In an era of "greed is good" Run-DMC kept the party going in the 1980's.

And the man in the middle was Jam Master Jay, headphones on, head tilted and hands moving furiously across the "wheels of steel". He brought the DJ out of the basement and into the living rooms of suburban America.

More importantly, Mizell never lost touch with his roots. He took to heart what many of us were told as children, "never forget where you came from", and reinvested his talent and resources in his community. Unlike so many artists who casually cast off their past like an old coat when they ascend to fame and fortune, Mizell understood that the past is always present. For him, success was a vehicle, large enough to bring everyone along for a ride.

If anything, his death is just another example of the senseless violence that is pervasive in our society.

And it demonstrates the randomness of violence; it spares no one, no matter your station in life. His death comes against the backdrop a brazen sniper, a disgruntled student who murders professors, emotionally disturbed soldiers who kill their wives, a suspected drug dealer who is charged with setting fire to the home of an anti-drug crusader, killing her, her husband and children, and hundreds of acts of violence, committed every day against ordinary people whose names we will never know.

Conflict resolution has gone the way of the Edsel. Violence is now the tool of choice to settle disputes. We see that in our communities and in the international arena as well. The behavior of our own nation toward the United Nations sends a chilling message that diplomacy is the route of weaklings, the truly powerful engage in aggression. How can we expect outrage when the citizenry engages in violence, when our leaders show us no other option? It is the same behavior that the street thug demonstrates when he pulls the trigger and takes an innocent life.

For critics who wish to use Mizell's death to paint hip-hop as a lawless and violent genre, they would do well to examine the military, film industry, television, video games, sports, and literature before casting stones. Violence is a multi-billion dollar industry that feeds a lot of people, sustains businesses, and inflates stock portfolios. It is the mother's milk that is now so pervasive that we cannot have a rational debate on domestic disarmament.

Violence is also the way of madmen. Some behavior cannot be rationalized and must simply be accepted as an act of lunacy. All the psychobabble and political punditry in the world cannot explain away the acts of a David Berkowitz, aka 'Son of Sam', Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer or the Beltway Sniper. There is a place where evil resides and unfortunately it is often next-door.

The music industry has lost a pioneer, the Mizell family has lost a husband and father, and Hollis, Queens has lost a homeboy. The nagging question is: Why?

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