A feud without rhyme o reason

An open appeal to Ja Rule, 50 cent to put their bad blood aside

By Renee Graham, Globe Staff, 11/11/2003

Dear Jeffrey Atkins and Curtis Jackson (a.k.a. Ja Rule and 50 Cent):

Have you knuckleheads learned nothing?

Tupac's been dead for more than seven years and Biggie Smalls for nearly as long, both victims of unsolved drive-by shootings. Many still believe simmering animosities between the two may have led to their murders, which occurred within six months of each other. This senseless loss of life made the hip-hop community sadder, but it was also supposed to make it a lot wiser.

Yet some rappers still spend more time nursing destructive beefs than trying to lift the rap music and the larger hip-hop culture they claim to care so much about. And for most of this year, you two, Ja and 50, have been dragging hip-hop music back toward its darkest impulses.

Last week, Ja, you sat across from Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan in an hourlong televised conversation, claiming you were willing to "see the bigger picture." You said you had more invested in the "overall state of hip-hop" than in adding fuel to the fire of this beef with 50. You said, "I'd be very crazy and disrespectful to say I wouldn't sit down at the table and try to help hip-hop."

Meanwhile, your latest album, "Blood in My Eye," has dangerously upped the ante with the boring anti-50 tracks "The Crown" and "Clap Back," in which you say "I'll pop ya top like champagne bottles."

And hey, settle down there, 50. I don't care how many millions your debut, "Get Rich or Die Tryin" has sold, it really withers with repeated listenings, including the Ja diss tracks "Wanksta" and "Back Down."

This nasty feud, the origins of which are still in dispute, turns nastier with each interview and each new diss track.

Yeah, I know beefs have always been a part of rap music. Even a cursory skim of the old-school files, when rap music was still largely consigned to block parties and small clubs, reveals a host of lyrical showdowns, including classic battles between Kool Moe Dee and Busy Bee, and KRS-One and MC Shan. But more than 20 years later Kool Moe Dee and Busy Bee are still friends, and KRS-One credits MC Shan with helping put him and his legendary Boogie Down Productions on the rap map.

Most important, the beefs never moved from wax to the streets. Even when MC Shan on "Kill That Noise," his response to BDP's "South Bronx," rapped, "I don't mind being criticized, but those who try to make fame on my name die," no one believed Shan would be gunning for KRS-One.

But everything changed when first Tupac, then Biggie, died. This was a cautionary tale written in blood to rappers, their fans, and the media that helped stoke the so-called East Coast-West Coast rap war. Less than a decade on, it's as if no lessons have been learned from the pointless deaths of two of the
most influential artists in the history of rap music.

There's nothing wrong with rivalries among musicians. The industry has always been competitive, and the need for one artist to top another has given the world remarkable music. Brian Wilson was so taken with the Beatles' "Rubber Soul" that it inspired him to create his masterpiece, "Pet Sounds." And in turn, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" was the Beatles' answer and attempt to top that Beach Boys' 1966 album.

Even when singer Ronnie Van Zant called out Neil Young on Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama," in response to Young's "Southern Man," which decried Southern racism, it was a pointed but innocuous exchange. Van Zant never baited Young with antigay epithets, and Young never threatened to bust a cap in Van Zant's head.

So it's high time for both of you to move on. Stop using the excuse that not responding to a diss track makes you look scared or weak in the eyes of your fans. Understand that your true fans wouldn't prod you both toward a violent confrontation. You've both risen above meager beginnings in neighboring sections of Queens, and you're both wealthy and famous beyond anything you could have imagined. Don't surrender it all for the recklessness and stupidity some confuse with being a man.

Enough is enough. Call it a draw or call truce. Just call this beef off before it turns lethal.

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