LIFE IN THE POP LANE

Eminem picks wrong candidate for release

By Renee Graham, Globe Staff | October 26, 2004

"Just Lose It" is the lousiest single Eminem has ever released from his four major albums, dating back to 1999's "Slim Shady" LP. Little more than warmed-over scraps from such past hits as "Without Me" and "Lose Yourself," the song seems to imply that the Detroit rapper has run out of new, interesting ideas for his upcoming CD, "Encore."

So it's surprising that Eminem didn't make "Mosh" the first release from his new album. It's everything "Just Lose It" isn't: compelling, timely, and, for once, controversial in all the right ways. His most overtly political track ever, it has lyrics that sound more like something one might expect from agitprop rappers the Coup, or the late great Rage Against the Machine, than the man spoofing MC Hammer and Michael Jackson in his current video.

Beginning with a group of children reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, the song segues into Eminem rapping about his favorite subject -- namely, himself. He also appears to acknowledge his role as an icon (for better or worse) to millions of listeners, calling himself a "rap phenomenon." Still, it takes the song a while to reveal its true angry heart and real target: President George W. Bush. With a buzz saw delivery reminiscent of the voice heard on his 2000 hit, "The Way I Am," Eminem laces into the president, calling him "a monster" and "a coward" who has pushed this country into an unnecessary and devastating war in Iraq:

"Let the President answer on high anarchy
Strap him with an AK-47, let him go
Fight his own war, let him impress daddy that way
No more blood for oil, we got our own battles to fight on our soil"

Produced by Dr. Dre, "Mosh" will be featured on "Encore," scheduled for release Nov. 16. Though leaked on the Internet last week and available on DJ Green Lantern's latest mix tape, "Shade 45: Sirius Bizness," it's the kind of track that should have been made widely available before the Nov. 2 election.

In published excerpts from an upcoming Rolling Stone interview out Nov. 5, Eminem continues his criticism of the president.

"[Bush] has been painted to be this hero, and he's got our troops over there dying for no reason," he says. "I think he started a mess. He jumped the gun, and he [screwed] up so bad he doesn't know what to do right now. We got young people over there dyin', kids in their teens, early twenties that should have futures ahead of them. And for what? It's seems like a Vietnam 2."

In the interview, Eminem, who says he is a newly registered voter, doesn't endorse Democratic challenger Senator John Kerry, but states, "I would like to see Bush out of office." So why didn't he release the powerful and potentially influential "Mosh" as his new single? Anything Eminem does gets instant acceptance on radio and MTV, and hourly airplay of the song could have had more of an effect on hip-hop-loving potential voters than all other worthwhile efforts -- including Russell Simmons's Hip-Hop Summit Action Network and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs's Citizen Change organization -- combined.

Throughout his career, Eminem has rarely used his considerable powers for social activism. He's skewered celebrities and spat stunningly offensive lyrics about women, gay men, and lesbians. Eminem has never much bothered with the troubles of any world outside his own. Perhaps he's been energized by Simmons (Eminem hosted an HSAN voter registration event in Detroit last May) to become more political.

In the past, Eminem has made jokes about President Bill Clinton's marital infidelity and Vice President Dick Cheney's heart problems, and he has denounced the music-censorship crusades of vice presidential wives Tipper Gore and Lynne Cheney. But "Mosh" marks the first time he hasn't backed away from inflammatory comments with his typical "I'm just kidding" nudge and wink.
Clearly, Eminem enjoys the publicity his provocations can generate. But one gets the impression that unlike, say, the Dixie Chicks, the rapper has often been reluctant to make the kind of barbed political statements that can alienate fans and corporate-controlled radio stations. (Last year, he leaked another anti-Bush track, "We as Americans," on the Internet, one that had him briefly investigated by the Secret Service for the lyric, "I'd rather see the president dead.")

Eminem isn't the only rapper in this political season to express his views on wax -- there's also Jadakiss's "Why?" and "Memorial Day" by the Perceptionists -- but he is certainly the biggest. Whereas "Just Lose It" is a trifle, "Mosh" is a salvo, but one that may have little impact when it's officially released two weeks after the election. For a man who often prides himself on his fearlessness, this time it seems Eminem has flinched by releasing his flaccid new single when he should have flexed with the far more potent "Mosh."

*Renee Graham's Life in the Pop Lane column runs on Tuesdays. She can be reached at graham@globe.com.*

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