



September 9, 2004

GET **4** WEEKS FREE
THE NEW REPUBLIC DIGITAL

[SUBSCRIBE NOW](#)

SEARCH

[ADVANCED SEARCH](#)

[SUBSCRIBE TO TNR](#)

[THIS WEEK IN PRINT](#)

[CAMPAIGN '04](#)

[ECONOMY](#)

[FOREIGN DISPATCHES](#)

[IRAQ](#)

[DIGITAL ARCHIVE](#)

[LETTERS](#)

[NEWSLETTERS](#)

[ABOUT](#)



[DOWNLOAD THIS ISSUE](#)

GIVE THE GIFT OF TNR

[MEDIA KIT](#)

TNR/ON

The New Republic's Symposium on Public Policy

**TNR is hiring:
Online Marketing Manager**

DEAD PREZ'S REPELLENT POLITICAL RAP.

Downbeat
by David Adler

Only at **TNR Online** | Post date 09.09.04

[Printer friendly](#)

[E-mail this article](#)

Rap music has seen no shortage of politically minded artists, compelling and otherwise. But the group called dead prez ("dead presidents" is slang for money) has reset the bar on hip-hop militancy. The Florida-launched, New York-based duo has a limited but loyal following. Late last March the group's two emcees, M-1 (Lavon Alfred) and stic.man (Clayton Gavin), released their fourth album, *RBG: Revolutionary But Gangsta*, on Columbia Records. It's been favorably but shallowly received. An interviewer for *Vibe Online* was typically upbeat: "...dead prez continue to tell it like it is, and it's all good for the 'hood."

There's an understandable reflex in the hip-hop world to laud "socially conscious" expression. But dead prez isn't simply rocking the vote. Read the music press and you'll learn nothing about the group's crude far-left agenda and cultish allegiances. Whereas most political rappers oppose the violent, materialistic "gangsta" ethos, dead prez has posited a third way. Robert Christgau of *The Village Voice* summed it up in an ambiguous one-line review of *RBG*: "Crime pays--better than capitalism, anyway." Rejecting the usual gangsta nihilism, the *RBG* code reconceives violent crime as revolutionary praxis. It's an ingenious twist: Take rap's entrenched "thug" archetype, hand him a Little Red Book, and you get dead prez.

The track "I Have a Dream, Too" ends with a long list of shout-outs to radical heroes, including the Black Liberation Army (BLA), which succeeded the Black Panthers in the early 1970s and pursued an intermittent campaign of violence for over a decade. The BLA is most famous for a 1981 Brinks armored truck robbery in Nanuet, New York, carried out with the aid of remnants of the Weather Underground, during which gunmen killed two police officers and a Brinks security guard. Mutulu Shakur, stepfather of the late Tupac Shakur, is believed to have masterminded the assault and is now serving a 60-year sentence. He is also on dead prez's list of shout-outs.

In the *RBG* liner notes, M-1 also offers a shout to the late Khalid Abdul Muhammad, the former Nation of Islam spokesman and founder of the New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. During a speech in 1997, Muhammad said, "There is absolutely no evidence to substantiate, to prove that six million so-called Jews lost their lives in Nazi Germany." It's not clear whether M-1 means to endorse Muhammad's anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial specifically; perhaps

Get **4** FREE ISSUES OF THE NEW REPUBLIC DIGITAL

[\[click here\]](#)



ELSEWHERE IN POLITICS

[Sign up for TNR Online's Politics newsletter](#)

[The story behind Al Qaeda operative Mohammed Naeem Noor Khan.](#)

he's saluting the "fallen soldier" who spearheaded the Million Youth March and protested white supremacist violence in Jasper, Texas. But the tribute is unqualified, and thus troubling.

Another shout goes out to "Chairman Omali," or Omali Yeshitela (formerly Joseph Waller), whose oratory can be heard on dead prez's debut album, *Let's Get Free*. Preaching a doctrine called "Yeshiticism," Omali heads the African Peoples Socialist Party (APSP) and is the founder of the International People's Democratic Uhuru Movement, with which dead prez is closely aligned. In *Burning Spear*, the APSP organ, Chairman Omali recently laid out his vision for the African continent: "The petty bourgeoisie is a dying social force in historical terms. It has no future. ... My objective is to bring them down. ... Neo-colonialism not only must be destroyed as a system--the neo-colonialists themselves are going to have to be physically destroyed before Africa can be liberated."

For a group whose cause is freedom, dead prez has placed itself in highly authoritarian company. And because the group harnesses anger over serious injustices, such as economic powerlessness, racial profiling, and police brutality, fans and sympathetic writers ignore or excuse the illiberal politics. Dead prez's responses to injustice, too, are hard to excuse. "Hell Yeah (Pimp the System)" proposes a novel solution to poverty and hunger: ordering a pizza and then robbing the delivery guy. "White boy in the wrong place at the right time/soon as the car door open up, he mine/we roll up quick and put the pistol to his nose/by the look on his face, he probably shitted in his clothes." "I Have a Dream, Too" finds the group spraying police officers with (rhetorical) gunfire and then mocking their suffering: "Need some help, officer?/Die Die Die!" In a review posted on epinions.com, "madtheory" echoed a common belief that the track envisages "gunning down police in the same cold-blooded manner black youth face from [the] NYPD each year." Wrongful deaths at the hands of the police are indeed an outrage, but what "I Have a Dream, Too" describes in response is a premeditated massacre. "We're definitely not calling on people to attack the police in any kind of way except for politically," M-1 told Chris Witt in a softball interview for the Knitting Factory website. "I Have a Dream, Too" may be just that--a dream--but its bloodlust is extraordinary.

Of course, anti-police rants, ugly crime scenarios, and anti-Semitism are hardly unprecedented in hip-hop. It is dead prez's sectarian ideology (and status as the de facto house band of the Uhuru Movement) that makes them unique. About this, they can be either bracingly forthright or staggeringly disingenuous, depending on the day. Asked by Chris Witt for a final word, M-1 replied, "I want to say people's army of the world unite. Soldiers, everywhere you are, rise up, fight fight fight, go all out." In an interview with Alexandra Phanor of BET.com, M-1 said, "It ain't like we have some message to preach."

If dead prez's politics are repellent, their music is another matter. Their tracks are sparse and rough-hewn, their rhymes swinging and syncopated feats of vocal prowess. (Their talent alone may explain

Everyone thinks that electronic voting will be the biggest problem in Florida's presidential election. But there are much bigger problems to worry about.

Does the Cato Institute want Kerry to win?

BOOKS & THE ARTS

Sign up for TNR Online's Books & Arts newsletter

The rap duo dead prez, with its unyielding Marxist-black nationalist dogma, is pushing far more than feel-good civic engagement.

A Confession, a poem by Czeslaw Milosz.

The Holocaust Museum's exhibition on eugenics and Nazi policy details the complicity of the German medical establishment in the most vicious undertakings ever conducted in the name of science--and offers a terrifying case study in the inobjectivity of the

people's willingness to forgive their politics.) They resolutely oppose what the critic Kelefa Sanneh has called "corporate rap." Unlike Method Man and Redman, dead prez won't be turning up in a deodorant commercial. Yet this comes at the cost of mainstream recognition. It doesn't help that Columbia, a division of Sony Music (now Sony/BMG), has already dropped dead prez from its roster, citing "poor projection of sales." Some speculate that politics were a factor, but more likely, Sony viewed dead prez as dead weight. (Phone calls to the label were not returned.) But recent collaborations with Erykah Badu and Jay-Z, opening slots for artists like D'Angelo, and rumored interest on the part of P. Diddy's Bad Boy label could signify that dead prez is headed toward a wider audience, bad politics in tow.

For the time being, though, dead prez flies under the radar. *RBG's* anti-police vitriol makes Ice-T's "Cop Killer" sound like a love letter, but it hasn't sparked any comparable public uproar. M-1's shout to Khalid Abdul Muhammad recalls Public Enemy's Jew-baiting over a decade ago, but so far the Anti-Defamation League hasn't said a word. Controversies like these would of course be a boon for dead prez's radical image, not to mention their receipts. Meanwhile dead prez has managed to gain credibility in left-wing circles and the hip-hop press as a model of forward-thinking hip-hop activism.

There's no reason music shouldn't provoke and galvanize us--and dead prez's First Amendment rights should be protected as vigorously as anyone else's, obviously. But if all dissent must be defended as a matter of right, some cannot be defended as a matter of substance. Dead prez, with its Johnny-one-note harangues and unyielding Marxist-black nationalist dogma, is pushing far more than feel-good civic engagement. "All good for the 'hood"? Hip-hop scribes ought to face that question more seriously.

DAVID ADLER writes for *Jazz Times* and other publications.

 [Printer friendly](#)
 [E-mail this article](#)

**Get FOUR FREE WEEKS
of The New Republic.**

RELATED LINKS

The A Rotation
What TNR's music critic is listening to. [web only](#)

Reagan Youth
Ronald Reagan is responsible for some of the best punk rock ever recorded. [TNRD web only](#)

Aging Too Gracefully
Patti Smith's new album lacks her original grit. [TNRD web only](#)

Where Has "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"
Protest music is being written about the war in Iraq, but it's not being played. [TNRD](#)

Love in Vain
Was Robert Johnson an antisocial misfit who sold his soul to the devil or an ambitious, hardworking creative artist? Two new biographies investigate the legends and the life of this classic blues master. [TNRD](#)

Like a Prayer
How an insurance salesman from Brooklyn convinced Madonna, Demi Moore, and Britney Spears that ancient Jewish mysticism could give them spiritual consciousness, better sex, and, just possibly, eternal life.

TNRD

Memphis Revisited

A rock and roll Rosetta Stone you've probably never heard. **TNRD** web only

Tin Pan Academy

Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical by Andrea Most

TNRD

ADVERTISEMENT

[Home](#) | [Politics](#) | [Books & the Arts](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact TNR](#) | [Subscriber Services](#)
Copyright 2004, The New Republic

[More Hotels](#)
[Hotel Rates](#)
[Hotel Ratings](#)
[Hotels](#)
[Event Tickets](#)