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David Banner, Hip
Hop Artist

“David Banner joins the fight over the N-word”

By Miki Turner

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Miki Turner, Writer

Before Mississippi-born rapper and budding actor David Banner was labeled the angriest black man in America, I had no idea who he was. And you probably didn't either. What you should know, however, is that this dude equates his manhood with speaking out instead of speaking up.

For the past few weeks Banner — whose real name is Levell Crump — has been engaged in a verbal beat down with the good reverends Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, because they are leading the charge in the war against rap and hip hop. He's also been critical of Oprah Winfrey, because she has steadfastly refused to invite anyone on her show whose lyrics contain the N-word, bitch or ho.

I was about halfway through my 30-minute telephone interview with Banner, a 33-year-old college-educated man who renamed himself after a comic book character, when I concluded that his motives in this war weren't exactly pure. Although he made some very valid points about the plight of young black males in America and the problems we have in this country in general, his credibility as the newly self-appointed spokesman for the rap/hip-hop community took a sharp blow when he tried to defend his continual use of profanity and the N-word in his lyrics; and as he went on ranting about the evil being spewed by Sharpton and Jackson.

He's living somewhere beyond the left wing.

Perhaps that is why Banner appears to be fighting this never-ending battle without the public support of his peers. Maybe Snoop, Ludacris, Nelly and 50 Cent also realize that he's mouthing off now to stir up publicity for his new CD — “The Greatest Story Ever Told” — which is dropping in October, or that he just likes the sound of his own misguided rhetoric.

It's one thing, however, to fight the good fight for creative expression, but it's quite another thing to wage war when your pistol is packed with greed.

What is even more disturbing, however, is that Banner has been publicly disrespecting his elders, which is a serious no-no in African and black American cultures. Harriett Tubman, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr. and James Brown must surely be rolling over in their respective graves.

‘I'm really not angry’

He's talking loud, but saying nothing that would enable people to take him seriously. So, I had to ask: “Brother, what's your beef?”

“I'm really not angry,” Banner said in a voice that bore just a slight trace of his Mississippi roots.

"As for Oprah, at least Bill O'Reilly will put the rappers on his show and go to head-to-head with them," he added. "I have more respect for Bill O'Reilly than I do for Oprah. They're always trying to paint us as militant. No, we're not militant. Oprah Winfrey, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, if you stop attacking the way I live, then we won't have any problem. I will admit there's a problem in hip hop but that is only a reflection of the bigger picture. It's about America's sickness and America's problem."

Banner, of course, doesn't think there's a problem with lyrics that glorify violence, perpetuate negative stereotypes, disrespect women and contain a word that has been historically used to demean and oppress an entire culture for centuries. As he sees it, the N-word has made him a young, rich black male and that's the only reason people of all hues are upset and want it banned.

"The problem is (rap) has lasted a lot longer and made a whole lot more money and made a whole lot more noise than they would have expected us to. The thing is — and I really need you to print this — America's new word for (N-word) is hip hop."

Now that I can get with.

'Kids want to hear it'

But even though there have been movements to permanently retire the word from the lexicon, Banner said that he's going to continue to use it as long as "kids want to hear it. I'm a Bible with a Playboy cover on it. It don't matter how they get the information.

"The problem is not young black men, it's the old white folks who put the word out there in the first place."

What he fails to understand is that those of us like Sharpton, Jackson and Winfrey who are old enough to know what it feels like to be called that word, are still recovering from the knife wounds we received back in the day. They hurt then, but in many ways the pain is even more intense now that the word is often used as a term of endearment among the seemingly lost generations.

Banner really needs to ask somebody.

What's even more twisted is the fact that Banner said if one of his young white fans called him the N-word he would "beat them bloody."

We need to join the Rev. Al in prayer.

The prudent thing for Banner to do at this point would be to schedule a meeting with the men and the woman he's been attacking. I don't think Oprah would be down for it — she's got an empire to run and souls to save — but I'm assuming that the men of the cloth would be willing to forgive and forget and use their collective wisdom to try and increase the peace in what seems to be an unwinnable, generational war of words.

But Banner says he isn't willing to do so. He thinks Sharpton and Jackson have "lost their way."

Funny, they probably think he's driving with a faulty GPS system, too. I know I do.

Let's just hope Banner finds his way back before he loses any more money and has no one to blame but himself.

"I'm making so much money now that I'm really happy! They always try to paint young black man angry. I'm not angry. That's why I smile. I'm telling the truth."

The truth is that the Sharpton-Jackson crusade against rap and hip hop is affecting Banner's bottom line and he's extremely ticked off about it. He's quick to mention how much money he lost by not promoting his last CD, "Certified" because he was too busy organizing a Katrina relief concert in 2005.

"I was out there doing their job for them," said Banner, a former student government president in college.

"Why does it take a gangsta rapper to talk about these issues? It's not my job and it's at my career's detriment. Al Sharpton said I didn't have a 'Banner' year last year. I didn't because I was doing his damn job. I didn't promote my album; I promoted the pain that was going on with Katrina."

Although Jackson hasn't publicly acknowledged Banner's criticisms, Sharpton's office recently issued a less-than-classy statement after Banner had told reporters that Sharpton could (perform oral sex on him). After initially questioning the rapper's sexuality, Sharpton then took the high road, saying that he would "just pray for him."

Guys, cock fighting is both illegal and immoral.

'Young black males don't have anybody'

But there were some things that Banner — who is best known for his hit "Like a Pimp" — said that resonated with me. Young black males are inarguably the most maligned species on the planet. It seems as though whenever they take two steps forward, someone or something is pushing them three steps backwards. Consequently, hope is a word they can neither spell nor comprehend.

Many of rap's brightest stars come from impoverished environments where this is the case. That reality makes them angry and their emotions are manifested in their lyrics. That doesn't always make it right, but it does make it real. And that's why these caged birds don't always sing the songs we want to hear.

"It's nothing but music," Banner said emphatically. "Everybody points the finger at rap because it's young black males. Young black males don't have anybody to come to their rescue — not even themselves. We'll beef with 50 Cent, we'll beef with T.I., we'll beef with Nelly, but we won't come to Akon's rescue when he's blamed for the 14-year-old being in the club when it wasn't his responsibility to check everyone's I.D."

"It's like Snoop said, 'Maybe I was raised by a mama on crack or gang bangers. Maybe I don't know no better. Teach me. Love me. Hold me.' The reflection of black people is with their black parents and what they did or did not do. What they did or did not teach us."

That's why Banner wants Sharpton, Jackson and Winfrey to let it be.

"I'm really disappointed that there are so many bad things that are going on," Banner said.

"From the Jenna 6, to the young kids that got killed in Jersey to the young man in New York who got killed coming out of his bachelor party. There are so many things that they could attack and that they can concentrate on."

He could rap about that without using offensive language.

Post-Reading Questions

1. There are many hidden, spoken, and unspoken rules that govern who can say the n-word, to whom, when, where. First, what are the rules and why do they exist? Second, and perhaps more importantly, to what extent do these rules promote and/or stop further racism? Why?
2. Related to #1, more specifically, is there a difference between when a black person says the n-word and when a white person does? Why or why not?
3. Should the n-word be banned completely? Would this limit personal expression? Why or why not?
4. To what extent would Turner support or reject the censorship of the n-word in *Huck Finn*? Explain your answer with support from the text.