

Coup, The

"Boots Riley on Communism, Capitalism and Patriotism"

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"The cover was a metaphor for the power of music to destroy capitalism," said Coup lead rapper Boots Riley when asked about the infamous artwork that was slated to grace the group's fourth album, Party Music. The design showed the Twin Towers exploding, before anyone even imagined September 11. It was supposed to be a political joke, but the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, demolished any humor it might have held.

The cover design has changed, but the Oakland-based hip hop group's political message has not. The Coup came of age in 1991, during the tail end of hip hop's golden era, when rap music with a politically conscious message was the norm of the day. Rapping about racism and capitalist exploitation, the Coup was able to find a niche for itself at a time when rap's focus was changing from the political to the street.

As the nation fell under the hypnotic spell of Snoop Doggy Dogg's "Gin and Juice," the Coup countered with their second LP, Genocide and Juice, a follow-up to their 1993 debut Kill My Landlord. They took their anti-capitalist message a step further in '98 when they released Steal This Album (echoing the famous title of Abbie Hoffman's Steal This Book), a critical success but commercial failure (not necessarily because fans took the message literally).

I recently talked to Boots about the Coup, rap music, the controversy involving the album cover, and his controversial political philosophy.

Why would you want to have an album cover showing the World Trade Center blowing up?

The original idea of the album cover was to be a copy of an illustration that was in the book Les Misérables, which has the picture of a high society party. People are waltzing in, bling blinging and looking rich, upper class and white. And they were looking down, surprised, at

the floor, to find a fist punching up through it. The label said it was too expensive, so I, along with the photographer, came up with a new concept. I wanted to show that our music was powerful in and of itself and that our music was something that would help destroy capitalism. Just like the White House symbolizes the government of the United States, a big symbol of capitalism is the World Trade Center. So blowing up the World Trade Center would be metaphorical, so we decided to use this image for our record cover. We started this on May 15, and the cover was finished on June 11.

After the attacks there were media reports that you had connections to Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network. Is that true?

No. Hopefully I will get rich off of that statement. As a result of the album cover, when reporting on what happened on September 11, a newspaper in Manchester, England reported a statement that said me, Boots Riley, had heavyweight ties to the Muslim world and that I knew about the bombing of the WTC. That is totally untrue. I do not think that a newspaper should be allowed to make statements that could destroy someone's reputation, hinder them from making a living and make it difficult to operate on a daily basis. We are going to sue that paper to make sure that we hurt them enough in the pocketbooks so that they do not do that again.

What was the response when you sent flyers with the cover art to music publications before the album came out?

The response was overwhelmingly positive. They wanted to use it for the stories that they were running. People thought this was a great album cover. Some said it was the best album cover of the year.

After September 11, the album cover was changed. It is very important for my political message to be absolutely crystal clear. But what happened on September 11 does not historically or philosophically represent what people are talking about when they advocate a revolution by the people. I wanted to make sure that was clear. Also, some of the humor that was in the cover prior to September 11 would not have been seen as funny. If you are telling a joke, context has a lot to do with it.

How do you feel now, after the terrorist attack that destroyed the World Trade Center?

Everything that my life has been dedicated to has been for life and the quality of life for people. So I definitely cherish life and think it is a sad thing when innocent life is ended, which is what happened on September 11 at the World Trade Center. I think that some people are more than saddened by it and are outraged. But the death toll has been mounting for years, and much of it has been at the hands of the US government.

When the US bombed a pharmaceutical facility in the Sudan, not only did they kill people onsite but also they destroyed 90 percent of the medicine available to the Sudanese people. The Sudan is a country ravaged by tuberculosis, AIDS and many other diseases. As a result of the US bombing on Sudan, millions of people were unable to have access to critical medicines needed to sustain their life. According to the Far East Foundation and the World Health Organization, the US government knew this before they bombed. As a result, the [casualty] figures, which will not be confirmed, the number of deaths range from 10,000 to 100,000 that might have died as a result of the bombing. The UN representatives wanted to have this number confirmed by the UN, but the US blocked the official UN inquiry on that subject, and to this date no one has any numbers on how many people were affected.

Does this justify what happened at the World Trade Center?

No. But in the same way, me as an individual going to kill everyone two blocks down from my house does not justify someone coming and killing me. The US government does not have the right to seek justice, because it cannot morally give out justice. It has been proven to be the hand of injustice. I think that many people, had they known about the mass killings in Sudan and others that the US has perpetrated, they would have been saddened by what happened on September 11, but they would not have been surprised. Live by the sword, die by the sword.

So if the US should not be bombing Afghanistan, how should we have responded to September 11?

The US government should stop terrorizing and creating a climate of terror around the world. That would be the end of it, probably. The US has been

gangbanging for profits, and they need to stop.

Define your political agenda.

I am a communist. I have been a communist/socialist since I was 14 years old. I think that people should have democratic control over the profits that they produce. It is not real democracy until you have that. And the plain and simple definition of communism is the people having democratic control over the profits that they create. When you first have a revolution, you are heading into socialism. People who were against communism have defined communism for us. People that are for communism and who have dedicated their lives and given their lives to giving people power, they are the ones that created the concept.

How do you feel about the wave of patriotism that is taking place, including expressions by blacks?

I think it is overblown. I think that the ones that are feeling patriotic already felt that way. They are just a lot more visible with it. I think that some people are getting caught up in the hype. I do not think that black patriotism is as extensive as some would think. Whatever people feel the flag symbolizes to them is of no matter, in the sense that what the flag is used for, it is used to symbolize support for military action. That is what it has historically been used for.

What does the flag symbolize for you?

It symbolizes oppression, exploitation, racism, slavery and murder. That flag has been planted in the ground only for a massacre to happen. That flag was waved here as they were making plans to kill 30,000 innocent civilians in Nicaragua, in order to overthrow a democratically elected government. The USA was found guilty by the World Court of killing 30,000 innocent civilians and ordered to pay 19 billion in reparations to Nicaragua, to which the US said that it would not adhere to the World Court's findings. This is one of the reasons that the flag does not represent democracy in a real or symbolic sense.

But socialism has been an historic failure, and many argue that the Communist Party sold out black people.

The movement for socialism has failed. But the reason it has failed is because the CIA and the US military have defeated it. It has been proven a failure because

the US has attacked it at every front. The Communist Party did sell out black people, because people are people and they have contradictions. But just because you agree with the general thrust of an idea does not mean that you agree with all of the decisions that individuals have made.

I will say that you can make a decision. Do you want to create a world in which a few people are living off the profits of the many, or do you want to create a world off of the profits that we create? We can argue over the ways to get there, but the point is that we know what a just society looks like. I do not care what name you put on it. I have no problem with calling myself a communist because I know the true history of the people who have called themselves communist. Socialism and communism have the same idea, which is that people should have democratic control of all the wealth that comes from their labor and there should not be any class above them that reaps the benefits. Capitalism starts off with a morally unjust idea. Therefore everything that falls under it happens for morally unjust reasons.

What happened to conscious rap?

I think that in the first place it was overblown. Its potentials were overblown, because a lot of groups got popular and one of its messages was internal change. People got excited and starting wearing the African medallions, and they thought a change in their life was going to happen. But they went home and there was no food in the icebox. To them, the movement had no basis in the material world. Any music that wants to call itself "conscious" or "political" has to connect itself with organizations that are actually involved in campaigns that will raise the standards of living of the people that are listening to the music. In that way only will the music be relevant. But as far as telling someone that they need to change what is in their head, that is not enough. If that is what your picture of the movement is, your music will be shown to be irrelevant and the people will discard it and throw it to the side. Gangster rap is relevant in that you can stand outside and make \$10 selling the rock. That is a material connection. It is something that I don't agree with, but it is connected to material. We have to realize that our struggle is about material resources being available for the community.

What should be the hip hop generation's response to

the war?

If people are against this war, they need to vocally and visually put out their viewpoint. They need to show this. Many people who are against this war are quieted because they are afraid of the backlash that will come from the media, the backlash that happened to [Congresswoman] Barbara Lee and countless others that are not only being attacked but are being used to show other people they shouldn't say anything against the war. By keeping people silent, they are distorting what they really think.

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