

Lil' Wayne, Little Boy

Written by Walter Fields

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Let me be upfront about my own ignorance. I have never listened to a Lil' Wayne track nor can tell you anything about the hip-hop artist. My only knowledge of him comes by way of pictures I have seen in newspapers and passing images when I am rapidly breezing the cable channels and one of the music video channels briefly appear on my television. What I do know is that he is immensely popular among young people and has a large following.

For the latter reasons it is time for Lil' Wayne to grow up. His ignorance was on full display when it was revealed that the lyrics of one of his recent rhymes included an insult to the memory of Emmett Till, one of our nation's civil rights casualties. The slight is symbolic of a Black generation that generally does not know its history and seems to take delight in wallowing in self-deprecation. Yes, it's a generalization to cast all young people into that lot but there is too much evidence to not suggest that something has really gone amiss with post-civil rights era Black children. There is truly a "conspiracy of memory" as our youth belittle our struggle and engage in self-destructive behavior that would please southern Klansmen of the Jim Crow era.

The simple fact that a Black artist would even consider associating the death of Emmett Till with a derogatory sexual reference to women shows how far we have fallen. Though I was born after the brutal beating and murder of Till, the Chicago boy who was visiting relatives in Mississippi, his story was conveyed to me in the 1960s and referenced as an emotional pivot in the struggle for Black rights. When I initially saw the infamous Jet Magazine photograph of the butchered boy in his coffin it first frightened me but then angered me deeply at the thought that whites had so little regard for African-Americans. It was probably the first image that made me cry; not even so much for Till but over the sickness of our nation. Now, years later a young Black man shamelessly tramples on Emmett Till's grave for the sake of selling a tune. This artist who proudly calls himself Lil' Wayne is behaving like a little boy.

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The Black community has grown too casual in its acceptance of internal insults to our culture and senses. We say little about music that is sexist and disrespectful, and accompanying imagery that breeds disrespect. Young people casually spew "nigger" as if it's a proper noun. Death is now a trade and we kill each other with such ease that we have become anesthetized and fail to see how we are murdering ourselves out of existence. Ignorance is the new smart, and the less we know the more popular we are. Instead of public representations of our best, we glorify in imagery of "real world" foolishness that is projected internationally as Black reality. We have reverted to being strangers in a familiar land with no moral compass to guide our path back to a meaningful existence.

I don't believe it is coincidence that Lil' Wayne's stupidity is on full display during Black History Month. Perhaps it is God's ultimate wake-up call for a people He gave the strength to escape bondage and the brutality of racial caste. Maybe there is no other way to get our attention than to just embarrass the hell out of us. What else can explain our seeming indifference to the murder of children at the hands of our own and the red carpet we have laid out to the prison gate as we fail to demand excellence in education – from our children, teachers and the professionals we pay to administer public schools? How can we have a generation that might actually do worse than the generation that was subject to fire hoses and vicious dogs on leashes controlled by police?

No, Lil' Wayne can't carry all that weight but he has to own some of it. For a young man who has cashed in on the struggle of others, and is a direct beneficiary of a period during which others bled and died, we should expect and demand more of him. If his music is the soundtrack for this generation then we are watching a tragedy unfold. While I hope Lil' Wayne is big enough to apologize to the family of Emmett Till, something the offending record label has already done, what I would really like to see is young people reject his "art" and start a movement to restore respect in music. We have been down this path before and we always come up short; probably because old heads like me try to lead. We can't. We can encourage and support, but young people must save themselves from themselves. It is as simple as that. If not, Black History Month in the next century will be a remembrance of a culture that withered away.

Walter Fields is Executive Editor of NorthStarNews.com.