

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Happiness of Adam Yauch

Levi Asher · Thursday, May 10th, 2012

It's hard for me to describe how big an influence the Beastie Boys have had on my life. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, I found lifesaving inspiration in records like *Paul's Boutique* and *Check Your Head* that I could not have found anywhere else. If it were not for the Beastie Boys, I'm pretty sure there would have never been a Literary Kicks.

I know a bit about the Beastie Boys. I've seen them in concert several times, though the live format didn't play to their strengths. The best way to listen to the Beastie Boys is with earbuds in, the world shut out. Their recordings were dense, complex and sophisticated, their rhymes expertly crafted for maximum effect. Each of the three had a highly distinct voice; you can listen to any line in any Beastie Boys song and immediately know whose voice you're hearing:

Horovitz: Some static started

Yauch: in the pool hall

Horovitz: Hit a motherfucker's face

Diamond: with the cue ball



I could not possibly tell you which of the Beastie Boys I related to most; they maintained a Tao-like perfect balance among the three. Adam Horovitz was the expressive one, a grimacing method actor, always mugging for the cameras. He was the rocker of the group, with a nearly un-musical Jerry Lewis whine to his voice. He was also the Beastie Boy most likely to drop a literary reference into a song:

You slip, you slack, you clock me and you lack

While I'm reading 'On The Road' by my man Jack Kerouac

Mike Diamond was the funny one, and the one with the most skillful lyrical phrasing, though his voice had less distinctive character than the other two. But he understood hip-hop, and he could scat:

Jump the turnstile, never pay the toll

Ding ding ding doo-wah diddy, busting with the b-roll ..."

Adam Yauch had the most memorable voice in the band, menacing, gravelly, instantly recognizable. He appeared to be the most intense and serious of the three. He rarely smiled, and on the early records he sometimes came off downright scary:

Roses are red

the sky is blue

I got the barrel at your neck

so what the fuck you gonna do?

When he wasn't scary, he was often highly despondent, and always made you believe he was feeling it, as when it's 4 am and he's got the Hassenpfeffer ale:

I got nothing to lose and so I'm pissing on the third rail

As a rapper, he was slow but had superb timing. "The Sounds of Science" would have been a great track even without him, but listen to what his weird drawl adds:

An MC ... to a degree ... that you can't ... get in college.

Yauch appeared at first to be the least charismatic of the three Beastie Boys, but he would gradually emerge as the George Harrison of the group, the spiritual one, and he came out as a Buddhist and a pacifist sometime between their third and fourth records, suddenly dropping references to the Dalai Lama and Martin Luther King into lyrics, writing songs with names like "Shambala" and "Boddhisatva Vow", and coming up with rhymes like this:

I want to say a little something that's long overdue

This disrespecting women has got to be through

To all the mothers and sisters and wives and friends

I want to offer my love and respect to the end

Yauch's transformation was a surprise, though in retrospect the philosophical, otherworldly sensibility had always been there:

Diamond: I once was lost

Horovitz: but now I'm found

Yauch: The music washes over and you're one with the sound.

Quickly after revealing himself to be a Buddhist, he kicked off a series of activities including the Tibetan Freedom Concerts of the late 1990s, and founded an organization called Milarepa. Adam Yauch's level of energy was amazing; he was also an adventurous filmmaker, and a skillful and inventive bass guitarist (note that the Beasties' best rock song "Sabotage" has a bass solo, not a guitar solo).

When I heard the news that he had throat cancer back in 2009, I felt terrible for the suffering I knew he'd be going through. I tried to post a cheery joke on Twitter:

@asheresque: they say Adam Yauch's voice won't be harmed during cancer surgery, but it might get raspy

The news was pretty unbelievable. Yauch appeared to be one of the most admirable and truly successful figures in the musical business, not in financial terms, but on the level of greater achievement. Like Bob Geldof (and, arguably, Bono) he was one of only a few rock stars who managed to transcend the limits of the scene and reach a higher stage — translating thoughts into action and actually stepping out to try and change the world.

In June 1997 I went with my daughter Elizabeth to the Tibetan Freedom Concert at Randall's Stadium in New York City (she was 11, and mainly wanted to see Alanis Morissette, who wasn't very good). During a break in the all-day show, Elizabeth and I were strolling around the tents outside the main stage when we spotted a bunch of orange-robed Tibetan monks off in a not very visible corner behind a trailer, looking like they were busy doing something interesting. "Let's go," I told Elizabeth, and we found ourselves in a small procession of Buddhist monks walking to the East River between Randall's Island and Astoria, Queens, under the Hells Gate Bridge, so the monks could bless the East River. COOL!

We were silently welcomed into the group. There were maybe twenty of us, half monks and half hipsters, the monks leading and us trailing behind. As we walked I spotted a familiar face and nudged Elizabeth. "That's Adam Yauch." Not surprisingly, he was part of the procession, walking behind the monks, eventually participating in the ceremony as we all blessed together the waters

between Manhattan and Queens. I didn't talk to him; it seemed like a solemn moment and I couldn't think of anything significant enough to say.

In retrospect, I could have talked with him about happiness. Here's [an interview with Project Happiness](#) that was published just last month. I'll let MCA get the last word.

PROJECT HAPPINESS: What brings you fun in life? What's fun for you, and what brings you peace?

ADAM: It's such a simple question, I don't know why it feels complicated. In terms of what brings me fun in life? Just goofing around with friends... laughing at myself. As for what brings me peace? Just trying not to do anything that's destructive to anybody else, or trying to do things that are constructive in the world, that really brings me peace. The times when I feel unhappy, I can almost directly trace it to, oh, I shouldn't have done that, or I shouldn't have said this, or whatever. That's what would take away my peace, or make me lose sleep or whatever. If I feel like I've done the best that I can or conducted myself in the most constructive way that I can in a situation, then I feel peace.

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