

Paul Butler. *Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice*. New York: The New Press, 2009. Pp. 214. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-1595585004

Reviewer: Aaron Marcus¹

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Music can unify and mobilize. It is passionate and evocative, yet accessible. It also embodies, and usually strongly, a particular cultural heritage. One doesn't need an education or money to sing its anthems. It can be shared simply by humming its tune. For these reasons, music and its associated style, lexicon, and images tend to be the primary method of relaying the consciousness of a particular group. Saying the words "we shall overcome," for instance, undoubtedly evokes a familiar tune and vivid images of the civil rights movement.

Since culture shapes music, and music influences culture, it was not a leap for Paul Butler to analogize criminal justice. In *Let's Get Free, A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice*, Butler theorizes that hip-hop can be used to inform a theory of criminal justice. He argues that hip-hop teaches us two overarching points. First, that it helps us identify particular failures in our current system of criminal justice. He argues specifically that the war on drugs, mass incarceration, and the culture of snitching are deterring justice in America. His second and more productive point is that hip-hop instructs us to impose a new, more responsive system of punishment.

Butler presents the points in the order relayed above, which is one of the few detractions from the book. He spends several chapters discussing society's ills such as mass incarceration and the war on drugs without firmly telling us what a hip-hop theory is. His theory's role in these matters is negated somewhat by its lack of clarity in the earlier chapters.

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