



Renegade Book Club Review-Tanning America: How Hip-Hop Created a Culture That Rewrote the Rules of the New Economy, Steve Stoute

The author, Steve Stoute, popularly known in Hip-Hop circles as “The Commissioner”, is as interesting as his book. A hip-hop personality with multiple careers: record executive, advertisement guru, entrepreneur and author. From 1990 to 1999, Stoute was an executive at several labels in the music industry. At Interscope-Geffen-A & M Records, Stoute served as President of the Urban Music division and executive vice president. Prior to joining Interscope, Stoute was president of Urban Music for Sony Music Entertainment, where he played a role in launching the music career of Will Smith. Stoute was the former manager to Nas, Trackmasters and Mary J. Blige.

In April 1999, Puff Daddy, barged into the offices of Stoute with several bodyguards, and struck Stoute over the head with a champagne bottle. In June 1999, Stoute sued Combs, resulting in a \$500,000 out-of-court settlement from Combs. The disagreement was over Combs' demand that a version of a Nas video (“You Can Hate Me Now”) he appeared in shouldn't be released.

In 2009 the American Advertising Federation inducted Stoute into their Advertising Hall of Achievement, the industry's premier award for outstanding advertising professionals age 40 and under. Founder, Translation Consultation and Brand Imaging, he specializes in connecting corporate brands with the community of hip-hop, which is referred to as “urban.

In 2005, Stoute became the Managing Director and CEO of Carol's Daughter, a line of natural hair and body care products created by Lisa Price in Brooklyn, NY. He formed a board of investors including Jada Pinkett Smith and Will Smith, Jay-Z, Mary J. Blige, Jimmy Iovine, Tommy Mottola, and Thalía and a bevy of spokeswomen for the line include Mary J. Blige, Solange Knowles, Cassie Ventura, Selita Ebanks, Kim Fields, and Jada Pinkett Smith. The company grew and sought partnerships such as Disney's "The Princess & The Frog" via a collection of hair and body products for children and HSN via an exclusive fragrance launch with Mary J. Blige. He has appeared in the HBO series and book "The Black List Project," featuring interviews and portraits with leading African American figures on being Black in America.

In the book under review, Stoute draws from his diverse background in the music industry and brand marketing to chronicle how an upstart art form – street poetry set to beats – came to define urban culture as the new embodiment of cool.

In February 2014, the book was made into a four-part documentary “The Tanning of America: One Nation Under Hip-Hop. In April 2014, the book was released as an audiobook narrated by Kerry Washington.

He advocates about how it is more than using the popularity of different artists, where he introduces "tanning." It is "the catalytic force majeure that went beyond musical boundaries

and into the psyche of young America blurring cultural and demographic lines so permanently that it laid the foundation for a transformation"

Stoute, offers an entertaining, instructive mix of business memoir, music history, and marketing tutorial. He argues that hip-hop blurred "cultural and demographic lines so permanently that it laid the foundation" for the transformation he calls "tanning", a process that would "alter the landscape of America racially, socially, politically, and especially economically."

He surveys the early development of hip-hop and the arrival of LL Cool J: "The hip-hop celebrity who gave the marketing world an early tutorial about the value of aligning their brand with the genre." Stoute then moves more fully into the world of commerce, where "advertisers were looking to use the hip-hop Midas touch" but had little understanding of "the consumer they were trying to reach." Stoute's entrepreneurship and expertise in rebranding (e.g., Ray-Ban, Reebok, Modell's) makes absorbing reading. For the uninitiated, this is a must have on the business of music; for music historians, it's a solid study of how "how urban culture came to influence the American Economy"

Throughout the book, Stoute connects the growing success of hip-hop to commercialization. He wrote about one of Sugar Hill's first and main successes, the record "Rappers Delight," along with the famous 1986 concert in Madison Square Garden, which Run-DMC's "My Adidas," went viral; it was the first time Adidas' German executives heard their song, and signed a contract with them. By the early 1990s, advertisers and large companies saw the effect of hip-hop; it was credible and marketable. However, they needed translators, those who could expose what would be "in" and could potentially sell.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and would recommend it to anyone curious about urban and youth marketing. It's a hip-hop marketing Bible of sort.

However, some elements of the book were lengthy. Specifically, it is dense in the number of words on each page. Nonetheless, "The Commissioner" incorporated a lot of his personal experiences, along with many hip-hop facts throughout history. It was also inspiring. Stoute was not afraid of stating that he did not complete college during the beginning of the book. An automatic assumption or judgment would be negative, but Stoute used his street-knowledge to build his own career. He, not only affected the music industry, but also predisposed the advertising field, which allowed him to create his own agency. He popularized hip-hop even more and proved that it is more than just a music genre. It is an economy.

It is definitely one of the greatest books wrote on Hip-Hop. It's a classic. Wrote in 2011 but still relevant today to anyone interested in harnessing the power of Hip-Hop culture to drive business growth.

Personally, my copy of the book underscored another message: the importance of books as a gift and the culture personal autograph. The book was gifted by my friend and brother, Shile Okunowo, in 2011. I only read it almost a decade later during the pandemic. The fact that he signed reminded me on where I got it from and I am forever indebted.

Notable Chapters:

Chapter 1. Pages 3-26 narrates the hip-hop history. It's cultural growth and relevance as well as the important personalities.

Chapter 6: "Mirrors and the Velvet Rope. Pages 135-164." Talks about the sneakers war between Puma and Adidas (didn't know they were brothers). How Reebok leveraged Hip-Hop for growth. The rules or ethics of hip-hop economy. I love "There is an unwritten law in the hip-hop code of ethics, woven into the belief system-the urban/suburban religion being spread worldwide through tanning. And that is the rule that always and forever you gotta represent what you love". Page 155-6. You can't sell out.

Peep also: "This raised another unwritten law in the code of ethics that hip-hop had given us-and that is about the power to change in order to grow. See page 162 paragraph 2.

Lastly, "if there is one particular rule that made the difference, it is the reality that doing business by the numbers, with focus on the bottom line, is an economic death trap". Page 164, Para 1

Chapter 10-"Tan is the New Cool." Page 253-284 is instructive. "Generations mixing with one another, like culture intermingling, and like brands with consumers, just need to have dialogues and megalogues and get to the common intersection of understanding" President Sarkozy, his son and Jay-Z on Pages 253-254 is interesting. Interview with Eminem on page 253-284.

Thank you.

'Wale Irokosu

12th March, 2023