
Book Review: *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World*

Mark Katz. *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 256 pp.

In his new book *Build*, Mark Katz provides a rich account of the people, histories, problems, and successes around the U.S. State Department's use of hip hop as a diplomatic tool. Katz served as director of the government's hip hop diplomacy initiative, Next Level, from 2013 to 2018 and traveled around the world meeting artists and participating in events. These experiences and his sharp observations and thoughtful reflections about them provide for an engaging exploration of what hip hop means to so many people, from so many backgrounds, and in so many places. While the book attempts to make the case for both hip hop and diplomacy, and to make a clear bridge between the two, it is most successful when it focuses on the art form and the artists, for whom Katz clearly has deep admiration. As he sees time and time again, for countless young people across the globe, the music matters because "hip hop saved my life" (6).

The book opens with a compelling story about two artists—one from Kampala, Uganda and one from New York City—who similarly found community, profession, and expression through hip hop. They meet through a Next Level event in 2015 and form not just a friendship but a working relationship through their art. Katz uses this story to introduce the idea of people-to-people diplomacy, a form of public diplomacy premised on intimate, personal connections rather than official or institutional ones. This method is key to presenting the United States as something other than a monolithic superpower. As the Ugandan artist Mark Kaweesi realizes through his experiences, "America is not one person" (14).

Many others have documented global hip hop and the creative explosion of sounds, styles, beats, and moves as the genre has morphed and evolved in its travels. What distinguishes Katz's book is his focus on moments and experiences of artistic collaboration and encounter in so many varied contexts. The strongest parts of the book are the central chapters in which he takes the reader into the spaces where artists meet and create together—a dance studio in Baku, Azerbaijan; a workshop in San Salvador; a concert in a Moroccan palace. He also delves into the history of the cypher, gender ideologies around b-boying and b-girling, and a fascinating backstory of the 1955 Bandung Conference and its impact on jazz diplomacy.

Along the way Katz introduces critical themes and questions around hip hop diplomacy. Chapters Two, Three, and Four address conflict transformation (a term Katz prefers over conflict resolution) through hip hop; tensions and ambiguities between art and diplomacy; and artists' motivations and strategies for working for the State Department. Although the book constantly cuts from one location to another, these central threads provide a sense of continuity, while the clear writing style and vivid color photographs keep the focus on the ideas and stories.

Katz anticipates his readers' skepticism concerning the idea of the U.S. government claiming and brandishing hip hop as a form of soft power. He begins the book by acknowledging this "dissonance" and the "unresolvable tensions" around the program—concerns that hip hop is being exploited, that artists are selling out, that it's all propaganda. Katz addresses these critiques by allowing many of the artists to speak for themselves, sharing their own reasons for participating in the program. Crucially, this discussion shows them as professionals—working people who are trying to get by, who need support, who are savvy and strategic. They recognize their material realities and the contradictions of their choices, and keep a clear-eyed view on what it means to be a working artist. As one artist says, "If you want to stay pure, stay home" (135). Katz also acknowledges the long history of Black artists seeking escape from the racism of the U.S. and looking overseas for personal and professional recognition; as well as the satisfaction members of underrepresented groups derive from being paid by the state. He argues that artists are engaged in "subversive complicity" by participating on their own terms, remembering and representing their local communities, and seizing opportunities many have long been denied.

Somewhat less persuasive are the sections of the book in which Katz pulls away from the artists and explores the government's interests and motivations. In Chapter Five, he quotes an observer who notes that, with U.S. public diplomacy in Muslim countries, "Americans are even telling us how to be good Muslims" (162). This statement sums up a central critique that neither the book nor the program is really able to overcome—the historical fact of U.S. hegemony and paternalism, and the violence it has committed around the world. Katz suggests that these historical realities are no longer relevant because young people do not always know what role the U.S. played in fomenting chaos in their own countries. But, as the current moment shows us so clearly, historical amnesia does not absolve a nation of its crimes. Katz presents the program's overarching goals—promoting U.S. interests and enhancing the U.S.'s image overseas—unproblematically and seems to accept that these are worthy aims. But, considering the Trump administration's America First policy, the War on Terror and its ongoing fallout, the endless decades of interference, assassinations, arms deals, and the stoking of civil wars in Africa and Latin America, these goals cannot be so easily accepted and validated. The irony of the book's subtitle is that it is the U.S. government itself that bears great responsibility for the "divided world" we live in.

Another issue is race. Katz is frank about his own whiteness in this project and includes an important discussion around the privilege it provides him. But larger questions of racism within the State Department, as well as in American twentieth- and

twenty-first-century history more broadly, are a bit underdeveloped. As has recently been reported, Black and brown diplomats in the foreign service have long been sidelined and discriminated against, and the face of State is overwhelmingly male and white. These larger structural issues are only touched on. In discussing the history of jazz diplomacy in the 1950s and 60s, for example, Katz mentions a “legacy of racial inequality” in the U.S., but does not sufficiently address the pervasive, systemic and ongoing rule of violent racism. Considering the reign of terror that the U.S. has inflicted upon so many of its own citizens for so long, how can we in fact justify projecting an image of freedom and “a robust democracy”? Katz is honest about these troublesome tensions and is courageous in not trying to resolve them all. His spare comments and mild criticisms of Trump suggest that he is also intentionally side-stepping the contemporary, toxic political moment.

Having myself worked for the United Nations for five years, I know that it’s easy (especially for academics) to criticize an institution or agency from the outside and to overlook the dissenting voices, contradictions, and strategies constantly in play. *Build* succeeds because Katz is neither defensive nor dismissive of these criticisms. With its honesty, up-close experience, and focus on the artists themselves, this informative, lively book will be of great interest to anyone who wants to know more about U.S. cultural politics or about hip hop encounters and collaborations around the world. ■

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