

# Never scared: the cultural significance of chris rock

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Standup comedians exemplify the trans-generational nature of our culture. With their ability to fully embody all of society's diverging values, while still always grazing the edge of change, they serve as the conscience of the people. As Lawrence Mintz argues, comics are licensed to say the unspeakable because they have the pity of the audience; they use the power of laughter to unite communities and tread society's shade of gray, and the most successful of them exercise a full awareness in the art of rhetoric. Mintz points out that comedians use these weak pity-warranting social positions to actually empower themselves. <sup>i</sup>

One of the top standup comedians known for this today is Chris Rock; he uses rhetoric to persuade his audience into finding humor in some of the darkest aspects of our society. Chris Rock uses rhetoric in his standup *Never Scared* to persuade his audience to adopt his views, while at the same time reversing the pity-warranting image that Mintz's claims give a comic his license to speak freely. Both of these personal intentions of Rock's in his stand up are dependent solely on how well he connects to the core values of his audience. Rock is credited for being best able at connecting the disintegration of family and relationship values of Blacks.

In *Never Scared*, Chris Rock discusses the deteriorating values of Black America and how these values are affecting black culture in America. He utilizes theories in social family structure with the African American family today and establishes himself as a role model for the black culture. He also sarcastically undermines the institution of marriage and the battle of the sexes in an intelligent and witty manner. Not only is he socially aware of all of these things that I have mentioned, he is also aware of the embarrassing

acts from his race whom he spitefully labels “ niggas.” Allow me to expand on the issues Chris Rock brings up in his comedy routines.

The days of funny schtick and prat falls are basically over. Through the years, much more substance has come to the attention of America when it comes to stand-up comedy. Lawrence Mintz states the following concerning this phenomena on page 72;

“ Clearly it is a popular art that is central to American entertainment, but in the universal tradition of public joking rituals it is more than that as well; it is an important part of the nation’s cultural life.” i

Chris Rock is an excellent example of this statement.

In Never Scared, Rock opens his routine with confidence and mentions his daughter, alluding to the reason why he hasn’t been on the road in so long.

“ It’s amazing when you have a girl... It’s eye opening, because I realize, I’m the man in her life. My relationship with my daughter is going to affect her relationship with men for the rest of her life. Every man in here has dated a woman with some daddy issues. That[[email protected](#)]%\$# ain’t fun ok. She’s giving you a hard time for some[[email protected](#)]%\$# her daddy did in 1969.” (Chris Rock, 2006)

Ever the sarcastic encourager, Rock sets up an example that needs to be revisited in the black community. He’s sensible and funny here but he is also alluding to something important. The black man in today’s culture needs to understand the importance of bringing up baby girls. He states that sometimes he picks her up out of her stroller, looks at her and that’s when it hits him;

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“ My job in this life now is to keep my baby off the pole!”

Of course he is referring to the ever-ominous pole found in every strip club in the world. This is profound wisdom for the deadbeat dads out there who aren't with their daughters. Some fathers are right in the room but too busy watching the game to pay any attention to the direction she might be headed if he doesn't start to get to know his little girl who is growing up.

It's interesting to note that an article by Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein almost discuss the same issue. ii With the rise of single mothers in urban areas and their struggle to make ends meet, we have to wonder what the sociological and psychological implications for the child are growing up in an environment without a father. Many of these children will grow up to be drug dealers, strippers and prostitutes in their struggle to get away from the economic prison they were unwillingly placed in at birth.

Speaking of birth, let's examine Rock's use of abortion and marriage. Nilsen discusses the important element of sexism in comedy routines in his article;

“ Sexist humor, which makes fun of the real or imagined characteristics of males and females, is seen in the oldest myths, fairy tales, folk tales, nursery rhymes, and sacred writings. Because jokes are a kind of shorthand, creators do not start with a whole new cast of characters for each joke; instead they rely on familiar scripts that include exaggerations and stereotypes. This enables listeners to fill in the details from the material that their minds have already absorbed from the popular culture.” iv

Throughout Rock's comedy routines, he brings to light the battle of the sexes concerning abortion and marriage. He discusses the two options that a man has when he finds out his girlfriend is pregnant;

"Wow! I'm so happy! I love you so much." Or the ill-fated; "So, whatcha gonna do?" Once again he silently stabs at the lack of responsibility concerning the man in this issue. He goes on to discuss the fact that the decision for abortion is made between the woman and her girlfriends. It is a sad but true commentary on the disintegration of society in general but Chris seems to be directing it toward black culture specifically.

There are strong arguments for the fact that married couples experience less stress and live a healthier life (Waite). iii Rock equates marriage to simple transference;

"When you're single, you wanna kill yourself. When you're married, you wanna kill your spouse!"

He discusses the problem of unhappily married men and their addiction to strip clubs. He adds that reasons for this are that women are domineering. In a funny little clip, Chris talks about the ho convention and glass heels. Then he brings up the fact that a wife is there to provide for you and be there for you but if you bring a pair of glass heels in the house, it will cause all sorts of problems.

As you can see, he strengthens his views of the black man being the wife's pet or the one that's supposed to do everything for her by using these jokes. He also portrays the man in the abortion bit as not having a say in anything

that happens with the child. He portrays the woman's friends at a higher level than her own boyfriend and the father of her child.

He jokes about strip clubs and infidelity but he still holds to the role model persona. He stands by his conviction of not cheating on your spouse and once again cements his position in black culture. Voicing his family values opens the audience up for his personal opinions about society. Rock's humorous perspective on life and his personal opinions about society mark the defining line between him as an individual and the family values he has affirmed to gain the audience's trust.

In his essay, *Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation*, Mintz explains the justification behind the stand up comedian's license to speak freely. Considering the fact that Chris Rock is an African American, he has free reign to speak out on the problems with African-Americans. As he displays his disgust with black stars like the child molesting, wanna-be-white Michael Jackson, he flows freely into the R-Kelly incident with the young girl on video.

We all know that he is using these incidents as well as the Kobe Bryant rape case and the OJ Simpson case because they are excellent material for comedy. But, it's also obvious that he uses these men as examples for negative black role models in America as well. It makes one wonder if he is warning his black audience of the path of self-destruction they may be on together. After all, great men like Sydney Poitier or James Earl Jones didn't do things like this to embarrass the black community.

Personally, I believe that his most compelling routine is the “ I hate Niggas” routine. The courage that it takes for a black man to stand up and say “ Everything white people don’t like about black people, black people hate even more. I love black people but I hate niggas.” He jokes about the fact that every time black people try to get together and have some fun like going to a movie, some “ nigga” pulls out a gun and shoots at the screen. It is most powerful when he utilizes this rhetoric in the presence of a more affluent black community.

By performing in D. C., Rock intentionally markets himself towards the wealthiest blacks in the United States, giving him all the more power once he is able to form a community within the room. But, this community Rock creates must be structured on some form of values with which he knows everyone can basically agree, and that will create an atmosphere of familial comfort. Rock does this perfectly in his stand up, and the structure can be noted from start to finish.

We can also observe the moral erosion of rap music. It used to be a positive influence in the black community. Chris Rock has played an important role in promoting rap music. Although, in Never Scared, He mentions the fact that it keeps getting harder to defend this popular urban genre. He states that it used to be easy to defend groups like Grand Master Flash because they represented the black urban culture as a whole. Then he goes on to state that he hates to defend it now because of lines such as the famous line from Li’l Jon;

“ To the windows, to the walls, ‘ til the sweat drips from my balls.”

These lyrics can't be defended. They do not spell anything positive for black society and the song certainly shows no respect for black women whatsoever. Granted, there were some pretty vulgar lyrics in the early days of rap also but not to the extent of today.

If we observe the work of Chris Rock, a strong argument can be made that he has created some of the most powerful rhetoric concerning the degradation of his own race in America. He stands by his values and doesn't squirm under the microscope like some stars. He has used his influence to create a teachable understanding of the social inequalities that occur in America. But, more than this he has made it simple for the average black family, or any family, to understand the major social issues surrounding black culture today. I think the most important thing that Chris Rock has done for the black culture and every culture in America is created a vital understanding for accountability within our own cultural social dynamic.

I have heard many people say that Chris Rock is a comedian, but he is an activist as well. Others say that his comedy is racially motivated against the white population of America. Still, some just won't watch him or listen to him because of his language usage. There are a number of labels we can put on this man and he allows us to do so liberally. Chris Rock may have missed his true calling as a social scientist. Maybe one-day comedians like Rock will receive honorary PhDs for their body of work in stand up comedy but for now, he's just a great comedian.

iv Nilsen A. P and Nilsen D. L. B (2000) Encyclopedia of the 20th century American Humor. Gender Humor. Phoenix, AZ: Oryz Press, pp. 170-174.



i Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation. Lawrence E. Mintz.

American Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: American Humor. (Spring, 1985), pp. 71-80.

ii Work, Welfare, and the Single Mothers' Economic Survival Strategies. Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein. American Sociological Review.

iii Does Marriage Matter?. Waite, Linda J. Demography. Vol. 32, No. 4, November 1995.

iv Nilsen A. P and Nilsen D. L. B (2000) Encyclopedia of the 20th century American Humor. Gender Humor. Phoenix, AZ: Oryz Press, pp. 170-174.

Quotes from Chris Rock came from his stand up routine Never Scared. 2006.