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Say It Louder For The People In The Back: A Review of NPR Music's Louder Than A Riot

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Abstract

National Public Radio's *Louder Than A Riot* billed itself as investigating “rhyme and punishment in America”. At a glance, it might appear as if this could be a short series podcast with 1-2 episodes, but the podcast managed to eek out 11 narrative nonfiction stories in the later half of 2020. The podcast is focused on carceral capitalism, which has been around since before the privatisation of the prison system in the US, and the collision with hip hop. However, it's not the number of episodes that make this podcast stand out, but the depth of each case that is thoroughly examined.

Keywords

hip hop, NPR, carceral racism, carceral capitalism, narrative nonfiction

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Say It Louder For The People In The Back: A Review of NPR Music's *Louder Than A Riot*

By Kim Fox, The American University in Cairo

Louder Than A Riot: Rhyme and Punishment in America, NPR Music, 2020.

11-episodes, 45-68 mins.

Hosts: Sidney Madden and Rodney Carmichael

Senior supervising producers: Rachel Neel and N'Jeri Eaton

Original music scoring: Kassa Overall

2020: The year of racial reckoning that began in the US with the malicious killing of George Floyd also birthed the National Public Radio (NPR) Music podcast *Louder Than A Riot* (*LTAR*). The limited-series podcast focused on hip hop, something that, as the podcast mentioned, Floyd dabbled in too. Floyd also spent some time in jail, which was another intersecting focal point of the *LTAR* podcast.

The prevalence of carceral capitalism may not seem to have a direct connection to hip hop, but *LTAR* hosts Sidney Madden and Rodney Carmichael highlighted every detail associated with the cases in the investigative podcast series. As they delved into each case, they often interviewed high-profile people connected to rap and hip hop like No Limit Records founder Master P. Even if you were familiar with the music of the key characters, each episode seemed to unearth some new information about the history of hip hop or about a specific case.

The opening and closing episodes did a good job of encapsulating the topic. The first episode introduced a long-held plot about how and when hip hop and the prison system became wedded to each other. The podcast wrapped up with what seemed to be an unedited dialogue between two women on possible solutions about those same entities that are in need of a divorce.

The *LTAR* podcast series encompasses many of *RadioDoc Review's* criteria; some of those criteria will be highlighted here, including storytelling, audience engagement, reporting and research, complexity or information and portrayals, emotiveness and empathy and impact.

Storytelling

The storytelling strength of *LTAR* was evenly spread across the five different cases, plus the concluding episode. Episodes were released on a weekly basis with a focus on rappers Mac Phipps, Bobby Shmurda, Isis Tha Saviour, Nipsey Hussle as well as DJ Drama. The entanglement of some storylines warranted more than one episode to unpack the layers. The case of Mac Phipps was one of those. It was the first in the series, it was a total of three episodes in the *LTAR* podcast series and also was included in a bonus episode after the series concluded. Phipps was jailed in 2000 and *LTAR* outlined how Phipps's colourful lyrics may have contributed to his conviction. The hosts also introduced many holes in the case against Phipps like when "the prosecution even changed the lyrics to make them sound self-incriminating (Madden and Carmichael 2020). According to *LTAR*, they would patchwork edit Mac's most graphic and violent lyrics, for example, lyrics from a song called 'Murder, Murder, Kill, Kill' and then the prosecution followed that up with a lyric from a different track called 'Shell Shocked'.

The outright injustice of Phipps's conviction was certainly clear upon listening to the episodes, which did not include a fresh interview with Phipps because of restrictions at the prison where Phipps was serving his term. In the end, the bonus *LTAR* episode was necessary because Phipps was released from prison after being granted clemency. This came *after* having been denied parole several times and just four months following the last part in the *LTAR* podcast series that focused on Phipps.

Audience Engagement

Hip hop's global presence was a strong hook for a potential audience for *LTAR*. People who might be curious about the genre and some of the characters in the podcast would tune in for that reason alone. However, the producers also provided an original soundtrack as a tactic to keep listeners engaged. It was interspersed with music by artists who were featured in the episodes. A [playlist](#) of that music has been available on Spotify. For audience outreach, the *LTAR* team utilised approaches that might not have been original, but that allowed the hosts to connect with their public. The nearly hour-long episodes encouraged listeners to share feedback on Twitter, where they also showcased examples of injustice that didn't appear in the podcast. Additionally, after the series concluded, a panel discussion was convened to discuss many of the themes that were presented in the podcast series. The [hour-long talk](#) has been archived on YouTube. Finally, the *LTAR* website featured original artwork that complimented each episode and the layout also included a transcript.

Research and Reporting

The *LTAR* team has gone on record to note that the podcast was a slow-cooking process. One account suggests that the production of the podcast took well over a year (Schneider 2020), but in the last episode mentions that it took two years to complete the series. Though each episode included credits including fact-checkers, oddly the website did not detail the crew behind the podcast. That oversight does not discount the obvious: the laborious research was apparent with the use of archival audio, travel to conduct interviews along with the intricate mind mapping of cases that were highlighted in this series. Both Madden and Carmichael have writing and journalism backgrounds; coupled with the NPR, there's an implication of a certain level of integrity that is to be expected. The hosts did a stellar job of describing spaces and places from the governor's mansion in Louisiana in the first episode of Mac's case to prison corridors and the people in them as witnessed in the opening scene in the 'Making Revolution Irresistible' episode.

Complexity of Information and Portrayals

The entirety of the *LTAR* series was overflowing with perplexing portrayals like some of the government officials involved with Mac's case. Another representative feature of the program was the complexity of information. The hosts were crafty with their dialogue and sometimes big points were delivered in a somewhat simplistic manner. One example of this was from what was technically the last episode 'Making Revolution Irresistible', and Carmichael says, "Prison development has gone up even as crime rates have gone down. All series, we've been highlighting stories of rappers impacted by mass incarceration not to show you how hip-

hop is under the gun, but to show you all the ways everyday Black and brown folk are under it". That punchiness resonates.

It seemed inevitable that the *LTAR* podcast would contain mostly male voices, given the male-dominated topic. Having one female co-host was helpful and there were many experts who were women like Dr. Regina N. Bradley, a professor on the 'DJ Drama' episode discussing Southern hip hop. But the surprise was one episode about Isis Tha Saviour, a Philly-based female rapper and her consistent run-ins with the law. It's a story told by *LTAR* editor Chiquita Paschal. She and Isis Tha Saviour are sisters. Their ending conversation, while addressing a lack of women's voices in the series, also added a personal touch with Isis trying to lure Paschal into a rap battle.

Emotiveness and Empathy

In 2017, the media and journalism scholar Mia Lindgren wrote that "first-person approaches in storytelling are particularly well-suited to audio journalism because it is a medium that favors the human voice" (Lindgren 2017). This affordance of podcasting exuded itself as a natural vibe in *LTAR*. Though the podcast was scripted, Madden and Carmichael delivered their narration in a conversational tone, with unrehearsed chemistry in their disposition, and in the timing of their pauses that allowed rich moments to sink in. Madden had a sombre tone when she delivered a line about a prisoner being left in a unit where there was a fire nearby and then the grainy clip from the prisoner confirming his dire circumstances. The realness of the moment is harrowing as well as maddening.

Impact

LTAR was recently recognised as one of the seven nominees in the Best Documentary podcast category at the inaugural Ambies, the awards for excellence hosted by The Podcast Academy. Additionally, the podcast has received nominations in the categories Podcast of the Year and Best Music Podcast categories at the iHeartRadio Podcast Awards. Winners will be announced in early 2022.

The International Music Journalism Awards, which only hosts five categories for awards, recognised *LTAR* as the Year's Best Work of Music Journalism in 2021. They remarked that overall, the podcast exposed "both appalling individual and structural injustices" ("Winners 2021 | International Music Journalism Award" n.d. 2021).

As if the above awards weren't enough, the end-of-the-year lists for 2021 have begun to make the rounds. *LTAR* secured a spot on *Vogue's* The Best Podcasts of 2021, which only included 11 podcasts (Hess 2021). Perhaps they will ring in the new year with a little bit more bling for introducing lesser-known stories of hip hop and the US prison system to a wider audience.

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In March, 2020 she executed, along with her team, PodFest Cairo, Egypt and Africa's first podcasting conference.

One of her areas of scholarly research is podcasting including recent publications like A Curriculum for Blackness: Podcasts as Discursive Cultural Guides, 2010-2020 and African Podcasting: Challenges and Chances.