

letter (3/16) complaining about *EW* inserting advertising on American Spirit tobacco. I would like to enlighten a few people on some little-known facts.

Let me state up front that I detest tobacco and smoking. I do not smoke and never have. I would be very happy if everyone quit! The secondhand smoke is unhealthy, stinky and problematic, especially for allergic individuals such as myself.

American Spirit cigarettes are mainly additive-free. This means they contain far less

chemical substances than most tobaccos. Not only are they easier on the lungs of the smoker, they are also less harsh for the lungs of someone who is not a smoker.

I used to work in a small office with one smoker and one other non-smoker. This smoker would chain-smoke on his way to work in the closed space of his car. When he came into the office, he reeked so badly of smoke and chemicals that I would choke up and start sneezing, and my other non-smoking co-worker would cough and leave the office. We

were hopeful that he would at least switch to American Spirit, but he preferred the "kick" he got from chemical-laden cigarettes. I have sat next to many smokers who were puffing on American Spirit and have not had the reactions that I get from breathing mainstream cigarettes.

So, I was decidedly overjoyed when I saw the American Spirit ad in *EW*. Maybe it will encourage smokers to try that brand of tobacco.

And, in answer to Jennifer's other question

about whether there are any other uses of tobacco besides smoking: Yes, there are. Most Native Americans use loose tobacco in a ceremonial way, without burning or smoking it. It is a very important part of their culture. There are also other herbal uses of the tobacco; such as a poultice for insect bites.

I do not pass judgement on *EW* for advertising American Spirit — I applaud them for it!

Deb McManman
Eugene

THE monitoring media

BY DEBRA MERSKIN



Celebrating Pathology

Why are we honoring the pimp culture?

Is it just me, or did something about an Oscar being awarded to a song about how hard life is for a pimp bother you? I know, some of you are saying, "It's just a song." "The movie was about getting out of that life." That may be true, but people I hear aren't necessarily processing the context when humming the content, particularly children.

"But I gotta keep my game tight like Kobe on game night" — now *there's* a role model.

We're living in a culture of pimpness. In fashion: Pimp Chic. Beverage: Rapper Nelly's Pimp Juice. On MTV: "Pimp My Ride." Video games: Pick your own pimp name, equip your hoes, and compete with other pimps in the video game *Pimp Challenge*. Use and then murder the prostitute in *Grand Theft Auto*.

One becomes a pimp by overpowering women and children through intimidation and threats of violence. How is it that mastering, belittling and dehumanizing is something to celebrate? This culture is normalizing "pimpness" to the point where it seems like a legitimate occupational category.

We see portrayals of pimps in the media, decidedly raced (black). Think *Shaft*, *Midnight Cowboy*. The stereotype is black pimp, black women. You know the look — he drives a Cadillac Eldorado, wears a fur coat, feathered hat, lots of diamonds. That's the stuff of Hollywood. The reality is much different. It's an equal opportunity profession peopled and patronized by men and women and children of all races and ethnicities. It's a power trip. There are at least four interrelated problems with what is happening here, and they have to do with race, class, gender and violence.

First, race. How often do you recall seeing an African-American actor in a lead role? How many Academy Awards have African Americans won in the 77 years of Oscar's existence? When thinking of roles played by African-American men, for example, which comes to mind first? Gang member, convict, hip hop/rap singer? Real positive, aren't they? Oscars have been presented since 1929 and yet it wasn't until 2001 that African Americans had won in both the Best Actor and Best Actress categories and it was the first time an African-American woman ever won. Film critic Roger Ebert said:

Some hailed the Washington-Berry victories as the beginning of a new era, but it was more clearly the end of an old one: Hollywood's long history of indifference to black talent is clearly over. But it is important to acknowledge that Washington and Berry won their Oscars because they deserved them, not because of symbolism or scorekeeping. And that for most black actors, the struggle for good roles continues relentlessly.

I'd say so. In fact, I seriously doubt the indifference is over, and sadly, 2001 might

have been it for a while. Even in this year's surprise win for best picture, *Crash*, two of the key African-American male roles were, you've got it, criminals.

Second, class. *Hustle & Flow* is set in Memphis, Tenn., which ranks among the 10 poorest cities in the country and is tied for eighth position with Atlanta for cities with the highest poverty rates. In 2003, 35 percent of Memphis' children lived in poverty and 23 percent of the households had an annual income under \$15,000. Now *that* is something to get angry about. The film is removed from the social conditions of the neighborhood it portrays. Granted, the lyrics acknowledge place:

But I gotta get paid, gotta stay above water, Couldn't keep up with my hoes, that's when shit got harder, North Memphis where I'm from, I'm 7th Street bound.

Granted, he's "tryin' to get this money for the rent," and "for the Cadillacs and gas money spent," but why? "Because a whole lot of bitches talkin' shit."

This brings me to third and fourth points: gender and violence in the winning song. When describing the prostitutes, the song says, "They come hopin' every night, they don't end up being dead."

Here are some statistics: In the U.S., 1 million adult women are prostitutes, and two-thirds begin this life before age 16. Some 500,000 to 1.2 million are children; 300,000 male prostitutes are under age 16. Studies show that as many as 78 percent of adult prostitutes started turning tricks (paid for sexual acts) before they were 16, some were as young as 10, and most enter the life by 14. About half come from homes in which they were abused; in fact, more than 90 percent of prostitutes lost their virginity through sexual assault. Most sexual assaults occurred at age 10, and some as early as age 3. Forty percent of street prostitutes are women of color (which means 60 percent are white, so if this is thought of as a race thing, white people need to check out the stereotype which belies this fact). About 55 percent of those arrested, however, are women of color.

"Hard Out Here" speaks to this as well:
Wait, I got a snow bunny, and a black girl too. You pay the right price and they'll both do you.

Recruitment works like this: a child runs away from home (this includes boys) to a city. A pimp picks them up, provides a place to live, and offers what appears to be love and understanding. Then, once they have the buy-in, these children are beaten, raped, and drugged, contract sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, and are disposed of if they become too sick to work. It is a violent, deadly life. Most are assaulted not only by

their pimps, but also by their clients. Right now, in Washington, D.C., Jaron R. Brice is on trial for recruiting girls as young as 14 to be part of his "stable of sisters," whom he sends out to "have sex for cash with men in alleys, cheap motels, and the back seats of cars." Brice got every dollar. Next week, the trial is of a man pimping 12-year-olds. Disposable.

That's the way the game goes, gotta keep it strictly pimpin'. Gotta have my hustle tight, makin' change off these women.

In *Hustle & Flow*, the sweetened portrayal of a pimp produces a sympathetic character the audience gets pimped into believing is a good guy; we are asked to feel his pain. *Washington Post* reporter Courtland Milloy states that, of course, stereotypes of the black pimp are (sadly) not news; however, "never before has the degradation of black women at the hands of stereotypically sluggish black men been so deeply ingrained in popular culture. Celebrating that pathology — even when it's 'only a movie,' or 'just a song' — is cultural suicide."

It's hard being a pimp? Well, it should be! However, as Oscars host Jon Stewart said, "I think it just got easier."



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