

Put Up Your Hands by Terry Bisson

MUSIC: KJ THEME.

HOST: Welcome to the Knee-Jerk Radio Theatre. "We don't tell you what to think. We just tell your knee what to do." Now presenting: PUT UP YOUR HANDS.

AMBIENT SOUND: CHEERS, CONCERT NOISES

THUMP THUMP THUMP

STRIVER: This is Maria Striver, for MS-ABCNNBC radio, and I'm here backstage at the biggest hip-hop show of the year, the Bling Bling Fling. Here's our star, PIMPMASTER BLING, leader of today's hottest rap group, Speld Funne.

BLING: Hey, hey, lady, put your hands in the air!

THUMP THUMP FADES ...

STRIVER: Mr Bling, I saw the first part of your show, and I am shocked. Calling each other — well, the N-word? And what's with the "bitch" and "ho" business? You have a lot of explaining to do.

BLING: Sure thing, lady. But first, you gotta put your hands in the air.

STRIVER: What in the world for?

BLING: Contract stuff. I'm not allowed to talk to nobody don't have they HANDS in the AIR. (beat) That's better. Now, where were we?

STRIVER: For starters, what's with this hands in the air stuff?

BLING: Part of the show. It's audience participation; submission, actually. It's their way of acknowledging us as role models. Sorta like a puppy wagging its tail.

STRIVER: Role models! Pimps and gangsters? Is that the image you wish to project to Black youth?

BLING: Of course not. What do you take us for? We only do it because he makes us do it. The White Man.

STRIVER: Excuse me?! You're blaming your vulgar behavior on white people?

BLING: Not white people. The White Man. That one there, in the white suit, in the corner.

STRIVER: Colonel Sanders! I didn't see you sitting there!

BLING: Course not. White people only see what they want to see.

COLONEL: Hip-hop rules. White meat or dark?

BLING: Of course he's here. Do you actually believe we would be publicly demeaning ourselves and our people of our own accord? That's blaming the victim, lady.

STRIVER: (sarcastic) 'Scuse me! So the Colonel *makes* you use the N-word? But why?

COLONEL: White meat or dark? Keep it 'hood.

BLING: Because he can't do it himself anymore — too politically incorrect. But he hates to give it up entirely. So he gets us do it for him.

STRIVER: And I suppose he also makes you dress like jailbirds with your pants falling down and your shorts on display?

BLING: He does, indeed. Tell her, Colonel.

COLONEL: Homies be stylin'. White meat or dark?

BLING: You see, the Colonel is a complicated dude. He both fears and despises Black people. He loves it when we play the fool. And he gets all shivery when we play the thug. When we put both together, like SPELD FUNNE, he's in hog heaven.

COLONEL: Word! White meat or dark?

STRIVER: But surely you know better than to call your sisters "ho's" and "bitches" on network TV? Can I put my hands down now? My arms are killing me.

BLING: Knowing and doing are two different things, lady. We know what we know, but we do what we do. Try waving your arms from side to side. That helps sometimes.

STRIVER: Only a little. Quite frankly, I find all this appalling.

BLING: As well you should. The Colonel's not deep but he's clever. Look how he says "stay in school" to cover his ass, while he fronts pimps and gangstas like SPELD FUNNE to spread the word that learning is "white." Which is a laugh — as if white people had any real love for learning themselves! The irony, of course, is that we as Black people have a long history of intellectual leadership, from Douglass to DuBois, from Malcolm to Mumia, from Toni Morrison to Octavia E. Butler. But hey, lady, it works. Half our kids don't even read. And those that do, hide it from the others.

STRIVER: That's terrible. What do you say to that, Colonel?

COLONEL: White meat or dark? Keep it Street.

BLING: See what I mean? He even tells us how to talk.

STRIVER: You mean the N-word? The "bitches" and the "ho's"?

BLING: I mean the ebonics and the vulgarity. They go together, and all his *downsizing* took a little doing, because we have such a rich tradition of lofty rhetoric. Can you imagine Malcolm X or Martin Luther King saying "we be a great motherfucking people, gnome sane?" (a beat) Gnome sane?

COLONEL: Keep it Real. White meat or dark?

BLING: Keep it Real as in real simple. It's all about keeping us down, lady. Who's gonna hire some kid who can't put a sentence together? Hell, any immigrant speaks better English than we do.

STRIVER: But in fact you are quite ... what's the word?

BLING: Articulate. But not on stage. SPELD FUNNE's job is to keep it real. That's so we won't say anything complicated. Or compete for jobs. Hell our kids can't even get a job in phone solicitations. Forget about law school. Welcome to the permanent criminal underclass.

STRIVER: And you blame all this on the Colonel? Why would he want more crime?

BLING: Crime creates jobs. Keeps the jails full, the cops grinning, and the courts busy. Keeps the war on drugs cranked up and war's good for business. It's elementary Keynesian economics.

STRIVER: I find this hard to believe. What about affirmative action?

BLING: He replaced it with *deformative* action. But lady, don't look so shocked. There's no end to the Colonel's devilry. Look what he's done to our music. Unraveled it.

STRIVER: Unraveled?

BLING: Uncomplicated it. "Keep it street" means keep it simple. Look at us, SPELD FUNNE. We're number one on the charts and not a one of us can play an instrument, much less read music.

STRIVER: But isn't that the whole point of hip hop?

BLING: You bet. These primitive sounds emanate from the very people who revolutionized world music. And not by making it simpler, either. Every music on the planet shows the influence of Ray Charles, Duke Ellington, Nat King Cole, Lady Day — my God, the list is endless. But hey, that's over; those folks were musicians.

STRIVER: And you're not?

BLING: Please. All we do is thump and jump. And show some rump. We rappers don't even have to learn three chords, like the rockers or the folkies did back in the day. All we gotta do is rhyme cash and slash — or maybe, gun and fun.

COLONEL: Who let the dogs out? White meat or dark?

STRIVER: The guns, the violence? Is that the Colonel's doing too?

BLING: Black-on-black. What's not to like? Get you a nine, and you be fine. Turn it on your brother and not no other.

STRIVER: This is appalling. Can I put my hands down now?

BLING: Not yet. Try wiggling your fingers. They say that helps. It's all part of the minstrel show.

STRIVER: The what? Your Bling Bling Fling is a minstrel show?

COLONEL: It's all good! White meat or dark?

BLING: Everything but the banjo, and that's cause nobody knows how to play it anymore. Of course, these days, instead of the happy dancing knee-grow we get the angry shufflin' gangsta.

STRIVER: To show your anger at the white man.

BLING: Nah. (scornfully) Gangsta's just stylin'. Pouting, like a supermodel. Doing that Hillfigger hand jive. He mad cause it look bad, and it bring on the bling bling.

STRIVER: So that's it! The big gold chains and stuff.

BLING: Chains. Doesn't that say it all? Can you doubt for a moment that hip-hop is the Colonel's nefarious doing? What better way to keep us down than to stunt our youth and make them "street."

Street ain't goin' nowhere, that why it be street.

STRIVER: You can certainly talk the talk. But don't you feel bad, doing this to your own people?

BLING: Bad? I feel terrible. Wouldn't you? It's worse than slavery, for there's no escaping it. Look what happened to Tupac.

STRIVER: I thought it was another rapper who shot him.

BLING: I don't mean his death, I mean his life. Even a kid raised by Black Panthers, conscious revolutionaries, gets sucked into the thug thing. The Colonel uses us most cruelly.

COLONEL: White meat or dark? It's all good.

STRIVER: And it's all done with money.

BLING: He has scads of money, that's for sure. He makes more off us. And even if he didn't, it's cheaper to keep us on as a clown show than to get rid of us. That would look bad, you know. Genocide is frowned on these days.

STRIVER: This looks a lot like genocide.

BLING; Doesn't it? But the Colonel's not blamed, that's his sly style. He has us doing it all ourselves. It's kind of like pulling yourself *down* by your bootstraps.

STRIVER: So why do it? Why take his money?

THUMP THUMP THUMP FADES IN

COLONEL: Bling, you're on. Keep it real.

BLING: Money? Please, lady. Do you really think we would sell out our people, betray our proud history of resistance, act the fool for thirty pieces of silver? For bling-bling? For a Versace or a Benz or a Grammy or a gold chain? I'm insulted; worse, I'm hurt. (beat) You can put your hands down now.

COLONEL: Represent, Bling! White meat or dark?

STRIVER: Finally! But now I'm really confused. If it's not the money, what is it?

BLING: It's the chicken. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a show to do ...

THUMP THUMP THUMP. BIG CHEERS.

BLING: (off) Hey, my niggahs. The pimpmaster be in de house. Shake yo booties and put up yo hands. Put up yo hands —

THUMP THUMP THUMP

AND FADE

FADE

FADE