

## BOOTLEG BLACK BART SIMPSON, THE HIP-HOP T-SHIRT STAR

By David Mills  
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*What do you think about the "Black Bart" phenomenon? Matt Groening, the creator of The Simpsons, says "Black Bart" sellers are ripping him off. Do you agree? Should people be able to make "Black Bart" bootleg t-shirts, even if Matt Groening disapproves? Should they be able to sell them? Why or why not? Please come to class prepared to argue.—CM*

**I**t can only be called the Afro-Americanization of Bart Simpson.

Young black folks across the country have adopted the wisecracking lad from "The Simpsons" — that wildly popular cartoon satire of white middle-class family life — as one of their own. At least when it comes to bootleg T-shirts.

At sidewalk stands everywhere, there is Bart wearing Nikes and sweat pants, Bart with a thick gold chain around his neck, Bart dancing to a beat box, Bart with cool "tracks" shaved across the side of his head.

And whether his skin is a naturalistic brown or a phosphorescent green, he's often uttering lines from hit rap songs. "Big ole butt!" "The girls, the girls they love me..." "Do the Humpty-Hump!" "You say he's just a friend."

Then there's "Air Simpson" — Bart shattering a backboard with a slam dunk, his tongue hanging out like Michael Jordan's.

One eyewitness tells of a hot new black Bart T-shirt on the streets of New York City: South African leader Nelson Mandela is standing over Bart, who's saying, "He's my hero."

Don't ask Sebrina Warren of Northeast to explain it, either. After buying a T-shirt for her 4-year-old son, Michael — the shirt with Bart and a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle shaking hands, and the message "Friends won't let you down," taken from a Jody Watley song — she says, "He likes Bart. Everywhere I go, it's 'Bart!'"

Even the vendors can't figure it out. "I'll be honest with you," says the man running a stand on Rhode Island Avenue in Northeast. "I don't know why in the hell people like 'em. But why not?" On a bad day, says the vendor, who wouldn't give his name, he'll sell 25 T-shirts at \$ 6 or \$ 8 apiece,

most of them Bart-related.

The only street phenomenon similar to this, in recent memory, was the bootleg, Afro-Americanized Mickey and Minnie Mouse T-shirts of a few years ago ("Yo baby, yo baby, yo ..."). But that was peanuts compared with the unmitigated appropriation of Bart Simpson.

"He's rebellious, he's cool," says Bill Stephney, president of SOUL: Sound of Urban Listeners, a New York record label. Bart, in fact, is "probably a lot more rebellious than a lot of the rappers today," he says. "He's certainly to the left of Young M.C. and M.C. Hammer." (Rap fans will hear an allusion to Bart Simpson in the song "Kelly Bundy" — inspired by another Fox network hit, "Married ... With Children" — by one of Stephney's groups, Young Black Teenagers, before the summer is over.)

Harry Allen, music writer and avowed "hip-hop activist," as well as a publicist for the rap group Public Enemy, says, "I think the Bart character is appealing because — I don't want to say he's kind of black. I don't mean that. He's just got some very unusual characteristics, from his haircut to his use of the word 'homeboy' infrequently, to even his general sassiness." (On "The



Simpsons," Bart has also used the funky phrase "work that body.")

Allen is a regular watcher of "The Simpsons" — it's "the most attention I give white people during the course of a week," says this avid Afro-centrist — and the show's "lack of pretension just resonates in general with the way black people view the world," he says.

What does "Simpsons" creator Matt Groening have to say about Bart's iconic significance to young African Americans?

"I can't decide whether it's that Bart lives up to their stereotypes of how stupid whites are," Groening says by phone from Los Angeles, "or whether they know the secret truth — that Bart is black himself."

Say what?!

He's kidding about Bart's ancestry. But Groening does say that the affinity between Bart Simpson and black youth is mutual. "I know the character better than anybody, and I know that Bart likes hip-hop," he says. Groening is actually writing a rap song for Bart right now, part of an album to be called "The Simpsons Sing the Blues," which should be released this fall.

On the West Coast, Groening has seen an unauthorized T-shirt combining Bart Simpson and Magic Johnson, and a "reggae" T-shirt that drapes the whole Simpson clan in dreadlocks.

While he is "flattered" by the street response to "The Simpsons," "I must say I have mixed feelings. You have to have mixed feelings when you're getting ripped off," Groening says. "I don't like these smokestack factories belching out bootleg Simpsons T-shirts. It's a huge business. 20th Century Fox takes this matter extremely seriously. There have been busts all over the country."

Still, he says, "the creativity of the way people respond to the show is fantastic. You should see the fan mail. Kids send in their pictures of Bart beating up other cartoon characters."

appeared on the market two weeks ago.

Stan Rosen, manager of a Pennsylvania Avenue gift shop, said he repeatedly sold out of the shirts, priced at \$ 13.95, until mid-March, when street vendors and other retailers began selling copies printed on thinner T-shirts for \$ 6 and \$ 7.

"These people are making a killing," he said. Experts say bootlegs accompany almost any T-shirt fad. "If there's a low-cost, high-quality sales item with a successful character out there, it's going to be counterfeited," said Peter Mayhew, president of Los Angeles-based Trademark Protection Services.

Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. hired TPS to hunt down and prosecute sellers of the illegitimate merchandise. The company uses written warnings, federal lawsuits and court-ordered seizures to curtail bootlegging.

While TPS and Fox try to stop sales of the unlicensed merchandise, licensed retailers and manufacturers see vendors and other store owners underselling them with counterfeit merchandise.

Jan Roth, owner of the City Shop at the Old Post Office Pavilion, had no trouble selling the licensed shirts for \$ 15.95 before the bootlegging began. Now, though she has cut her price by \$ 3, the shirts remain on the shelves. "I had a guy in here just now and he looked right at me and said, 'I think I'll go buy one from the vendors,'" Roth said. "They don't care that it's not authentic."

Going after the unlicensed vendors and retailers isn't enough, said Dan Barasch, president of Changes T-shirt Manufacturers, one of the few companies Fox has licensed to make the shirts. Instead, TPS should go after the counterfeit manufacturers, he said.

"The question is how much you can get out of a vendor . . . you shut one guy down and another guy opens up down the street," Barasch said.

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### BOOTLEGGING 'SIMPSONS' T-SHIRTS

By Debbi Wilgoren

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"The Simpsons" is drawing raves across the country, but local retailers say sales of licensed T-shirts depicting the zany Fox Television cartoon family have nearly stopped since bootleg merchandise