ICONS OF HIP HOP
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Roxanne Shante (page 51). © David Corio.


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Queen Latifah (page 217). Courtesy of Photofest.


De La Soul (page 265), one of the founding members of the Native Tongues posse, along with A Tribe Called Quest, the Jungle Brothers, Afrika Bambaataa, and others. © David Corio.

Ice Cube (page 293). Courtesy of Photofest.

Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg (page 317), 1993. Courtesy of Photofest.


Lil’ Kim (page 439) in the pressroom at the 2006 MTV Video Music Awards in New York. © AP Photo / Tammie Arroyo.

Big Boi and Andre 3000 (page 457) pose in front of the three awards they won at the 46th Annual Grammy Awards, 2004. © AP Photo / Reed Saxon.


Missy Elliot (page 503) performs during the 2003 MTV Europe Music Awards in Edinburgh, Scotland. Courtesy of Photofest.


Kanye West (page 555) performs “Jesus Walks” at the 47th Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, 2005. © AP Photo / Kevork Djansezian.
Foreword

I grew up in the seventies and eighties in East New York, Brooklyn, where summertime meant playing freeze tag, kick the can, and skelly in the streets. Seventy-nine was the year that changed my life forever. “Rapper’s Delight” was played so many times on my grandmother’s stereo that it became part of me. So much so that I know all the words by heart to this day. It was *The Great Adventures of Super Rhymes*, not Slick Rick (that is the generation following mine) that had me hooked like Benji from the Alice Childress novel *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ but a Sandwich* the first time he tried smack. That would be the summer that would change the course of my life or rather put me on the right course. A new family moved onto the block that summer. There was a young mother named Debbie and her young son. I forget his name, but the story goes like this.

It was the last block party of the summer and a bunch of dudes we had never seen before were standing in front of the building where the new family was living, clearly friends and family of the new family. The older guys were up in arms because in those days a group of young black men on your block that did not live there usually ended up in some sort of physical confrontation. Dirty looks and ice grills were exchanged and had the block hotter than an Eskimo in the desert. But before it could escalate, some guy that looked like JJ from *Good Times* called several of the kids indoors. Here we go . . .

The block party had just started and it was going to get shut down already. A few minutes passed and the door of the building flung open but instead of sticks, bats, chains, and other popular tools of destruction, the strangers came out carrying huge speakers. Speakers? All of a sudden fear had become curiosity. I was about eight at the time and had never seen speakers so big. And I grew up in a party house! I wanted to get a better look so I got closer. The young men kept their focus on hooking up the speakers, concentrating on the task at hand. By this time a pretty decent crowd had gathered but they seemed not to notice—like they had done this a thousand times. I had heard stories about block parties with gigantic speakers playing music you could
hear for miles and kids dancing in the street. But I had never witnessed it firsthand. All we ever did at the neighborhood block party was play hide and seek, round up, catch and kiss, and eat all the different kinds of food everybody’s mother was cheffing up on the grills. And as far as music, people put their stereo speakers on the porch and played Marvin Gaye, Bob Marley, jazz, salsa, and music from their native lands. It was sort of like a musical jambalaya, and every few steps you discovered a new flavor.

The scene that was being set up this summer afternoon looked like something I had heard of, the new music that I heard the older kids around the way talking about. Of course! It was unfolding before my eyes..... I couldn’t believe that I was about to see hip hop with my own two eyes—I was so excited that I couldn’t move. Out came the milk crates, a piece of plywood, turntables, and last but not least an extension cord from the first-floor window. When they hooked up the power cords it was like watching one of those old-school Frankenstein movies when the scientist hits the lifeless pile of spare parts with a million volts of electricity, but instead of a hideous monster a different beast was awakened. A few of the strange dudes grabbed the mic and started spittin’ the flavor. Rhymes like “dang diddy dang di dang da dang ding, my meat taste better than Burger King...” or was that the song they were playing? Whatever it was, they had me mesmerized. I had never seen live DJing or MCing, never heard of Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, or any of the godfathers of hip hop. That was my first true hip hop experience. Of course after that everyone wanted to know the people who brought real hip hop to East New York. The JJ-looking kid’s name was David and from what I remember he became an instant block star. What a way to move into a neighborhood! My aunt and some of the older kids on the block became friends with David and his homeboy Charles and started a little crew. Well, they seemed like a crew to me. They had sweatshirts with their names ironed on them and they DJed parties around the hood. My aunt had to babysit me so I was their official mascot. As wack as that sounds, I thought it was the bomb.

I started writing my own rhymes and got my big break at my aunt’s birthday party the following summer. When I look back, I must have sounded ridiculous. I was only nine or ten years old but it was official to me: I was an MC. The next few years went by and I listened to anything hip hop, memorized every record, and battled my sister on the porch so I could sharpen my skills. The mid-eighties rolled around and hip hop had become the dominant street culture. MCs got more complex with their flows. Kool Moe Dee taught us about safe sex. Rakim taught us how to spell “emcee.” Kool G Rap showed us how to paint pictures with rhymes on the canvas of the mind. KRS-One showed us that the most brilliant mind was the criminal mind. Run-DMC took hip hop worldwide and sucker MCs could never touch the mic again. Whodini gave us five minutes of funk that lasted all the way through the new millennium. Doug E. Fresh made beats with his lips. The Fat
Boys ate everything in sight. There was Big Daddy Kane, the Jungle Brothers, 3rd Bass, Biz, and so many different MCs we would need a whole book to name them all. There were the MCs that influenced my style. Because biting was a cardinal sin, I had to take a little from Melle Mel, a little from Grandmaster Caz, and all the other great MCs and form my own style. Jeru the Damaja style . . .

People always ask me where I see hip hop going in the future. I must admit I loved the days when MCs weren’t all about only getting paid. And your skill was the currency that made you the richest cat in the hood. But all things must evolve, even things we wish could stay the same. So what do I see for the future of hip hop? Hip hop is the future.

Long live hip hop.

—Jeru the Damaja
Choosing the twenty-four most important hip hop artists of all time is no easy task. From Kool Herc to Kanye West, *Icons of Hip Hop* spans four decades of MCs and DJs, old-school pioneers and new-school innovators, to profile the figures who have made hip hop music what it is today. Hip hop music, once considered a passing fad, continues to thrive and evolve more than thirty years into its history. *Icons of Hip Hop* presents the stories of twenty-four important figures who have contributed to the music’s development and success.

Our profiles begin with Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash, two DJs who established hip hop’s musical foundation with their invention of breakbeats and turntable scratching. These hip hop pioneers collected funk and soul records and transformed their record players into instruments that created new sounds through backspinning and scratching. These turntable techniques, along with digital samplers and drum machines, form the backbone of hip hop music. The sounds that DJs like Herc, Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, Pete DJ Jones, and Grandwizard Theodore invented have been built upon by three decades of DJs and producers, from Rick Rubin and Jam Master Jay to Eric B and the Bomb Squad to DJ Premier, DJ Scratch, Dr. Dre, and Kanye West.

At Kool Herc’s block parties in the 1970s, the DJ was the focal point of the performance, and the MC, or rapper, served chiefly to call the crowd’s attention to the DJ and to entice people onto the dance floor. As early MCs like Coke La Rock and Busy Bee began to develop more complex rhyming routines, the MC came into his own. Famous MC battles, such as the 1982 competition between Busy Bee and Kool Moe Dee, took rhyming to a new level as these MCs sought to win over the crowd with their rhyme structure, wordplay, and wit. Whether hyping up the DJ or boasting about his or her own skills on the mic, the MC was always a crowd pleaser. With the 1979 release of Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” the first hip hop record to reach mainstream radio worldwide, the rapper became the face of commercial rap music.
“Rapper’s Delight” also introduced mainstream listeners to the terms *rap* and *hip hop*. The song begins with the words, “I said a hip hop….” From that early moment in hip hop history, when *rap* and *hip hop* were used in the title and first lines of the same song, the meanings of these two terms have been debated. When many fans and artists talk about hip hop, they explain that it is a culture that expands beyond music to include four central elements: graffiti art (aka tagging or writing), b-boying (aka break dancing, popping, and locking), DJing (aka turntablism, or mixing, cutting, and scratching records), and MCing (aka rapping or rhyming). On his song “9 Elements,” KRS-One expanded this definition to include five more elements: beatboxing, fashion, language, street knowledge, and entrepreneurialism. In his lyrics to “9 Elements,” KRS makes the distinction that to rap is merely an action that anyone can take, but “Hip hop is something you live.” Both terms, hip hop and rap, however, are used to describe music. To distinguish between the two forms, the term *hip hop music* is often used to designate a song that holds true to hip hop’s orginal aesthetic rather than appealing to a pop audience, and the term *MC*, as opposed to *rapper*, is often used to designate a hip hop vocalist who holds true to this same aesthetic. In an exclusive interview for *Icons of Hip Hop*, Roxanne Shante’ explained the difference between MCs and rappers: “Rappers need videos, MCs don’t.”

Although Shante eventually did make a video, she first made her name going head-to-head with other MCs in the street. Her record “Roxanne’s Revenge,” hailed as one of hip hop’s first answer records, took rhyme battles into the recording studio as she responded to a single, “Roxanne, Roxanne,” by the group UTFO. Roxanne initiated a series of answer records from several different MCs, and extended hip hop’s competitive element to recordings and radio airplay. Video airplay would become even more important to Run-DMC, whose visual imagery of black fedoras, gold chains, and unlaced Adidas sneakers would introduce hip hop fashion to MTV audiences. As hip hop culture moved into mainstream outlets like MTV, listeners sought to preserve the original culture by making distinctions about which songs counted as “real hip hop” and which were created for crossover success on the pop charts. In the mid-1990s, MC Hammer dropped the “MC” from his name, claiming he was in the business of entertainment rather than hip hop, in response to criticisms that his pop hits like “U Can’t Touch This” were selling out hip hop culture. Debates about what characteristics constitute rap or hip hop rage on today as artists like Defari claim to make “real hip hop” rather than pop rap.

Ideological distinctions aside, however, rap music is an inextricable part of hip hop culture. Artists and listeners will continue to argue about which MCs are making music to make money and which ones do it out of a pure love for hip hop, but even as these debates continue, we should remember that the shiny suits and diamond grills we see on MTV and BET in the twenty-first century are as much a part of hip hop as the Kangol hats and Fila jumpsuits
worn by hip hoppers in New York City parks in the 1980s. Rather than debating which figures belong to rap and which to hip hop, *Icons of Hip Hop* showcases the inventions and innovations of twenty-four musical icons from 1973 to 2007. Even at two volumes, however, our icon profiles are not comprehensive. As with any collection, there are omissions. Throughout the book, however, we make connections to other MCs, DJs, and producers whose stories intersect with the twenty-four figures we have chosen. Each profile discusses and cross-references other artists connected with the icon at hand. A foreword from Jeru the Damaja, a rapper included in Kool Moe Dee’s list of the top fifty MCs of all time, credits the artists who influenced his rhyme style. Nicole Hodges Persley’s timeline of hip hop history highlights the innovations of artists like Kurtis Blow and Schoolly D, icons who are not included in our twenty-four in-depth profiles. An afterword by veteran rap artist Masta Ace lists the twenty-four most overlooked hip hop icons, who are worthy of further study. Exclusive interviews with Masta Ace, Roxanne Shanté, Mystic, and Kool DJ Red Alert, included in the Roxanne Shanté profile, provide a firsthand account of the development of the first female MC to spark a national trend. And finally, Shamika Ann Mitchell’s exclusive interviews with DJ Premier and DJ Scratch give further attention to producers, the people behind the music, as icons.

The scope of *Icons of Hip Hop* is intentionally broad in that we seek to profile old-school originators as well as new-school innovators, devote attention to the different regions that have contributed to what hip hop culture has become in the United States, and recover the stories of lesser-known artists. As the editor, I sought to pay homage to those artists, like Ice Cube and Eminem, who typically come to mind when hip hop is mentioned, but also to call attention to groups like the Native Tongues and Eric B. & Rakim, that haven’t matched Ice Cube’s sales but that rank high on many fans’ lists of the best rappers of all time. In short, the twenty-four artists profiled in these two volumes were chosen based on their unique contributions to the development of hip hop music, style, and culture: Grandmaster Flash made the turntables an instrument, Eric B. & Rakim created more complex rhyme flows, MC Lyte proved that women could rap with aggression, Outkast shifted attention to Southern hip hop, and the Native Tongues provided a much-needed critique of hip hop culture itself. Each essay ends with a section on the legacy of the artists, which emphasizes their influence on hip-hop today and their importance to hip hop in the future. We include producers and DJs as well as MCs, fan favorites as well as platinum-selling artists, women as well as men, and Atlanta and Houston as well as New York and Los Angeles. With this approach to selecting its subjects, *Icons of Hip Hop* presents a historical and cultural framework for hip hop that extends to current or emerging artists, unearths the histories of important artists from outside hip hop’s mainstream, and examines the varied and ever-changing forms of the music.
Each of our twenty-four profiles features in-depth coverage of the artist’s life and work, highlighting the artist’s influence in making hip hop music and culture what it is today. The profiles are supported by several sidebars that place the icons within cultural and historical context. The sidebars highlight such issues as hip hop’s homophobia, vegetarian rappers, hip hop and Islam, the mafia, horror films, fashion trends, musical innovations such as turntable scratching and digital sampling, legal issues, and hip hop’s culture of death. There are certain consistent themes to the sidebars, such as regional scenes (Houston, Memphis, and Canada), and hip hop’s intersections with other musical forms (rock, jazz, blues, and metal). Each profile also includes a discography and list of resources for further research. Broad in scope and distinctive in detail, Icons of Hip Hop is an excellent resource for the student or casual listener as well as the true hip hop head.

—Mickey Hess
Jeru the Damaja ends his foreword to this volume by reminding us that hip hop keeps on evolving. This is an important consideration because many critics long for a past era, complaining that hip hop has changed too much. A common and unfortunate version of the story claims that hip hop began in the 1970s as an innocent form of self-expression, and became corrupted by money, violence, and sexism as its artists left behind New York City street corners for MTV videos. This ideal of a purer, unadulterated hip hop is complicated, though, because hip hop has never been any one thing. Several of hip hop’s pioneers sought to make money from their music, and several MCs heard on today’s radio are dedicated to making quality songs. Because hip hop began in South Bronx parks and on street corners instead of in a major-label recording studio, fans and artists are nostalgic for a purer moment in time, when hip hop music wasn’t heard in McDonald’s commercials and the Pillsbury Doughboy had never considered rapping to sell crescent rolls. Corporate record labels have bought into hip hop, but they haven’t bought it up; the individual, entrepreneurial spirit that drove hip hop’s early years is alive and well in independent labels like Swishahouse, Stone’s Throw, and Hieroglyphics, and rappers themselves have become CEOs of larger record companies: Jay-Z heads Def Jam, Scarface heads Def Jam South, and Dr. Dre has built his Aftermath label into a rap dynasty. In its thirty-plus-year history, hip hop has gone worldwide. It has become big business. Yet the music remains alive today because hip hop has never meant any one thing. The music has never stagnated because artists are constantly inventing new forms and responding to clichés in their music, constantly seeking to one-up their peers. If real hip hop were truly defined by the shape it took in the 1970s, then hip hop would not be alive today.

Nas’ album *Hip Hop is Dead* (2006) blames hip hop’s commercialism for killing off what was vital about the original culture, yet on this same album Nas brags in his lyrics about seeing his face on the side of Sony’s promotional trucks. Full of such contradictions, the album’s bold and
provocative title sparked a lot of response, including an on-air debate between old school rapper (and pioneering female MC) Monie Love and Southern rapper Young Jeezy on Love’s radio show on Philadelphia’s WPHI-FM on December 7, 2006. Monie Love supported Nas in pining for hip hop’s good old days while Young Jeezy asserted that hip hop is alive and well in the South and that Nas disrespected the new breed of Southern hip hop artists by declaring the music dead. Nas certainly wasn’t the first person to declare hip hop dead because it has moved too far away from where it began. Yet although some critics claim that real hip hop was killed off by hyperconsumerist gangsta rap and its fascination with shiny jewelry, expensive cars, and sexy dancers, a more accurate history reveals that hip hop has long embodied these contradictions between culture and commerce. Political, consciousness-raising rap has existed, and continues to exist, alongside thug rap and party rap. Niggaz Wit Attitude, Compton, California’s gangsta rap pioneers, shared a bill with De La Soul, Amityville, New York’s Afrocentric-conscious rap pioneers. When these two groups were paired for a U.S. tour in 1988, hip hop was young enough that their sharing the bill made sense: after all, they were both rap groups. Almost twenty years later, hip hop music has expanded to include several specialized subgenres, and a conscious rapper like Talib Kweli would seem terribly out of place opening for a gangsta rapper like 50 Cent. It would be like Bob Dylan opening for Black Sabbath in the 1970s.

The secret to the unlikely pairing of N.W.A. and De La Soul lies in the themes of N.W.A.’s “Express Yourself” and De La Soul’s “Me Myself and I”: Each of these groups believed that hip hop is about being yourself, not fitting into a current trend. What all hip hop subgenres share is a love of beats and rhymes, and the value of the individual perspective. N.W.A. rhymed about drug dealers, gangs, and guns because that was part of the reality they witnessed in their South Central Los Angeles neighborhoods. De La Soul were from a relatively affluent background, by comparison, so they rhymed about going to high school, and about the fact that they didn’t fit the mold of what it meant to be a rapper. In their video for “Me Myself and I,” the three members of De La Soul are failing Professor Def Beats’ class in rapping because they don’t wear gold chains and they can’t adopt an aggressive pose for the camera. Instead, De La Soul wore their Day-Glo colors and black Africa medallions, and showed listeners an alternative definition of what it meant to be hip hop.

De La Soul were not the first rappers to reinvent the model of hip hop style. Run-DMC did it before them by ditching the flashy, disco-style costumes of Kurtis Blow and Whodini and putting on blue jeans, gold chains, and unlaced Adidas sneakers. N.W.A. had done it with black dungarees, Lakers’ caps, and dark sunglasses. In his book about country music, another American music form where authenticity is hotly debated, Richard A. Peterson defined authenticity as fitting the model while at the same time proving not to be a copy of that model (95). In hip hop music, artists must constantly reinvent the
model of real hip hop by responding to it from their own unique perspective. The Fat Boys rhymed about food. The Geto Boys and Outkast opened up hip hop to the South. MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Lil’ Kim responded to hip hop’s aggressive sexuality from a female perspective. Kanye West, the son of university professor Donda West, made it okay to be middle-class. Eminem and the Beastie Boys adapted an African American form without mimicking it or taking credit away from those who created it. These artists made hip hop their own by imbuing it with their own reality and writing and delivering lyrics in a style that reflects that reality by preserving regional dialect and slang to tell the story of the place that they come from.

Yet even with these musical innovations and new perspectives, even as hip hop has spread across the United States with vibrant scenes in Miami, Houston, Atlanta, the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, and Memphis, and even as Hip Hop’s popularity grows in Germany, South Africa, Australia, and Japan, certain aspects of its original model remain. Hip hop traces its roots back to African griots and the bad-man legends of folklore figures like Stackalee. Hip hop music grows out of Jamaican DJs boasting and toasting, out of the dozens, snaps, “ya mama” jokes, and playground chants heard from girls playing double Dutch. Hip hop music grows out of the blues, jazz, funk, rock, rhythm and blues, and disco. Its heroes are Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Madam C.J. Walker, and Angela Davis. Its closest predecessors, lyrically, are Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets. Rhythmically, it draws from James Brown and Rick James. But just as its drumbeats and bass lines are adapted from other music forms, hip hop has in turn influenced today’s rock music and dancehall reggae, and has left an indelible mark on pop music, culture, fashion, and language. Because hip hop values individuality in the way Snoop Dogg and E-40 speak, the way Lil’ Kim and Outkast dress, and the way Kanye West and Dr. Dre make beats, it preserves individual style even as it all becomes a part of hip hop.

In that respect, *Icons of Hip Hop* seeks to mirror the range of perspectives that makes hip hop what it is. My perspective on hip hop’s history is only that, my own. I grew up listening to hip hop in Eubank, Kentucky. My friends and I lip-synched to U.T.F.O.’s “Roxanne, Roxanne” at the sixth grade talent show. Dubbed cassette tapes of Too $hort and the Geto Boys were passed around my middle school like contraband. I used to scope out Pirate’s Cove, the mall arcade, for someone over eighteen who looked cool enough to buy me the uncensored version of Eazy-E’s *Eazy-Duz-It* or N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton*. Failing that, I settled for the Kmart censored versions, where “motherfuckin’” became “crazy-lookin’” and “Fuck tha Police” was left off entirely. I was a white kid in Eubank, Kentucky, listening to censored rap cassettes my mom bought me at Kmart. I grew up listening to hip hop, and I continue to listen to it, write about it, and teach it today. In editing this collection, I strived to recruit contributors whose perspectives I value, even when they do not match my own. I believe that *Icons of Hip Hop*, like hip
hop itself, greatly benefits from this range of perspectives, and that the collection represents both a wide range of artists and varied approaches to thinking about them.

—Mickey Hess

WORK CITED

A Timeline of Hip Hop History

Nicole Hodges Persley

1973 Jamaican American DJ Kool Herc creates the breakbeat by isolating the most exciting instrumental break in a record and looping that section so that the break played continuously. The breakbeat becomes the cornerstone of hip hop music. At his legendary block parties, Herc powers his turntables from street lamps, running extension cords from the outlets to his speakers and turntables. Herc pioneers a revolution in DJ technique with his mobile sound systems; rather than rely on a venue’s sound system, Herc owned his own equipment, and could move from spot to spot in the city.

1973 The Lockers dance group is started in Los Angeles by Don Campbell, the inventor of the locking dance style, in which a series of faster moves are linked together by points of freezing in one position, or locking into place. Members of the Lockers include Don “Campbellock” Campbell, Fred Barry (who went on to play Rerun on the popular sitcom What’s Happening?), and Adolfo “Shabba Doo” Quiñones (who went on to play Ozone in the films Breakin’ and Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo. Locking began in the 1960s as a dance form associated with funk, but it became a hip hop dance style and heavily influenced the creation of hip hop dance forms like popping and breakdancing.

1975 The MC is born from the call and response routines between DJs and the audience. Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa borrow from the African and Caribbean traditions of boasting and
toasting to talk over breakbeats and move the crowd to action. Hip hop’s most famous DJ calls such as “And you don’t stop” and “Yes, yes y’all” begin. Busy Bee is one of the first MCs to work with DJs to get the crowd moving. He becomes one of the first MCs to freestyle rhymes, and one of the first to work with a DJ to record his rap routines.

1977 The Rock Steady Crew is founded by Jojo and Jimmy D in the Bronx, New York. The b-boys of Rock Steady use dance as a way to combat problems with rival gangs in the Bronx. The term b-boy (and b-girl) is used to describe these new dancers who move to the breakbeat in a series of flowing poses. One of the most famous members of the Rock Steady Crew is the b-boy Crazy Legs, who started his own chapter in 1981 in Manhattan. Other important members of Rock Steady Crew are Frosty Freeze, Take One, Little Crazy Legs, and Ken Swift.

1979 Sugarhill Gang releases “Rapper’s Delight,” considered the first rap record. Although the Fatback Band’s “King Tim III (Personality Jock)” was released just prior to “Rapper’s Delight,” making it the first rap record ever released, its commercial success and cultural impact did not match Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” which became a worldwide hit.

1980 Kurtis Blow becomes the first rap artist to release a full-length album on a major label when Mercury releases Kurtis Blow on the strength of the success of singles like Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” and Kurtis’ own “Christmas Rappin’.” Kurtis’ second single, “The Breaks” broke into the top five on the U.S. R&B Chart, making him the first solo MC to achieve commercial success.

1981 Graffiti artist Fab 5 Freddy, who is later the host of MTV’s Yo! MTV Raps, is shouted out in Blondie’s song, “Rapture,” which is a number one hit in the UK and United States. Blondie’s Debbie Harry, who raps the shout-out to Freddy, is an icon of New York’s punk and underground art scene of the 1980s, and “Rapture” bridges these two cultures similarly to Jean-Michel Basquiat, a graffiti artist turned art star. Prior to his work on Yo! MTV Raps, Fab 5 Freddy produced the music for and had a lead role in 1982’s Wildstyle, which is considered the first hip hop film.

1981 Turntable scratching is featured on Grandmaster Flash’s “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel,” one of the first rap records to capture the sounds of live DJ scratching.

1982 The famous battle between Kool Moe Dee and Busy Bee takes place at Harlem World in New York City. Kool Moe Dee wins
the battle and becomes famous for his unique vocal style and his ability to freestyle rhymes. Kool Moe Dee goes on to found the rap group Treacherous Three with Special K and DJ Easy Lee, and he later stages another famous battle with LL Cool J.

1982 Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five release “The Message,” which is arguably the first “conscious” rap song. “The Message” includes the famous hook “Don’t push me ’cause I’m close to the edge.” The song depicts conditions of poverty and disenfranchisement and becomes an icon of hip hop music and culture for many who hear it because it expresses the frustrations of the urban communities where hip hop developed.

1982 Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force release *Looking for the Perfect Beat* on Tommy Boy Records. The album, featuring the cut “Planet Rock,” becomes the first rap record to use synthesizers and an electronic drum machine. Bambaataa samples electronic music from European group Kraftwerk in this song and creates a hip hop classic as well as a new base for electronic dance music. Digital music genres such as house and electronica also consider this song a part of their histories.

1984 Run-DMC’s self-titled debut album is released, and their music video for “Rock Box” is the first rap video on MTV. Run-DMC starts two important fashion trends in hip hop: hard-shell Adidas shoes and gold rope chains.

1984 U.T.F.O. records the song “Roxanne, Roxanne,” which disses a fictional woman who doesn’t respond to the group’s advances. The song incites a string of response records, including the Roxanne Shanté (Lolita Shanté Gooden) song “Roxanne’s Revenge,” which sold over half a million copies. Adelaida Martinez, calling herself The Real Roxanne, responded to Gooden in the song “Romeo,” and several other MCs, male and female, weighed in with their own responses. By some estimates, the Roxanne Wars created nearly 100 response records to U.T.F. O’s original song.

1984 Fresh Fest is the first national hip hop tour in the United States and the first tour to galvanize a diverse group of rappers together under a single billing. It is one of the most successful tours of hip hop music, appearing in over twenty-seven cities across the United States. The roster includes acts such as Run-DMC, Roxanne Shanté, Kurtis Blow, Whodini, and the Fat Boys. The tour grosses almost 4 million dollars. In 2005, the Fresh Fest returns as an old-school summer concert series featuring many of the headliners that opened in 1984.
1984 Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons form Def Jam Records, initially selling records out of Rubin’s dorm room at New York University. Def Jam’s first two releases are LL Cool J’s “I Need a Beat” and the Beastie Boys’ “Rock Hard.” The 1985 film *Krush Groove* is based loosely on Rubin’s and Simmons’ lives as hip hop producers and label executives. Simmons hired Blair Underwood to play himself while the Beastie Boys, Run-DMC, and several other Def Jam artists appeared in the film as themselves.

1985 Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew release “The Show.” Doug E. Fresh, the original human beatbox, goes on to work alone as a beatboxer, MC, and producer. The Get Fresh Crew included Slick Rick (formerly known as MC Ricky D), Barry B, and Chill Will.

1985 Tipper Gore’s group PMRC (Parents’ Music Resource Center) demands a ratings advisory for explicit lyrics in rock and rap music. The goal of the PMRC is to create a system that can alert parents to the explicit content of rock ’n’ roll and rap records. Gore appealed to traditional American family values. The PMRC pushed for a rating system similar to the film rating system but instead secured a requirement for record companies to mark their products with the label “Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics,” also known as the Tipper Sticker.

1986 Run-DMC’s *Raising Hell* is the first platinum hip hop album. On “Walk This Way,” a hit single from the album, Run-DMC collaborates with rock legends Aerosmith to produce a rap cover of their 1975 classic “Walk This Way.” The single both rejuvenates Aerosmith’s career and catapults Run-DMC to platinum status. The song is considered one of the first crossover hits in rap music, reaching the Top 5 on the *Billboard* music chart.

1986 Salt-N-Pepa’s *Hot, Cool & Vicious* album debuts, bringing new attention to female MCs with platinum sales and a Grammy nomination. “The Show Stopper” is a response to Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew’s “The Show,” “Tramp” addresses male promiscuity, and their breakout hit, “Push It,” a B-Side to “Tramp” single asserts female sexuality and desire.

1986 A battle over the true home of hip hop begins between KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions and Marley Marl’s Juice Crew. MC Shan’s lyrics in “The Bridge” (1986) point to Queensbridge. In Boogie Down Productions’ “The Bridge Is Over” (1987), however, KRS-One argues that the Bronx is the home of hip hop. The battle continues in over ten records
1986 Ice-T’s “Six in the Morning” becomes a hallmark of West Coast gangsta rap. Ice’s rhymes about Los Angeles gang life build from the style of Philadelphia’s Schoolly D, who spoke about gang life on “Gangster Boogie” and “P.S.K. (What Does It Mean?).”

1986 Def Jam releases the Beastie Boys’ *Licensed to Ill*. Former skaters and punk musicians, their mix of hip hop, rock, and punk create a new sound for hip hop music. The Beastie Boys are the first white rap group to have success in the genre, and their hits “No Sleep ’til Brooklyn” and “(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party)” propel their sales past the mark set by their mentors and Def Jam labelmates Run-DMC.

1987 Eric B. & Rakim produce the hip hop classic *Paid in Full*. Rakim presents a laid back and sophisticated new style of rapping that mimics jazz riffs, while Eric B. creates his own innovations as a DJ. Together, the team raises the stakes in the rap game because they create more complex rhymes and sample schemes in their work. Today, many MCs cite Eric B. & Rakim as one of the top rap groups in history. Hip hop magazine *The Source* named Rakim the best MC of all time.

1987 Public Enemy’s *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* is released. The album gives a sample of Chuck D and Flavor Flav’s black radical commentary on social issues that will be more pronounced on *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Boogie Down Productions releases *Criminal Minded*. BDP’s DJ Scott La Rock is killed this same year.

1988 *Yo! MTV Raps* is born. The show is so popular that it is soon split into a weekday afternoon format, hosted by Ed Lover and Dr. Dre, and a two-hour Saturday night format, hosted by Fab 5 Freddy. The show features rap videos, interviews with rap artists, skits, commentary, and trivia about the artists from the hosts. The show is one of MTV’s most successful shows, running for seven years. It serves as an outlet for rap stars to promote their records to a large audience.

1988 Will Smith and DJ Jazzy Jeff win the first Grammy presented for rap music. The song “Parents Just Don’t Understand” goes gold. Will Smith and DJ Jazzy Jeff go on to record several albums together that receive numerous awards. They are known for their fun-loving party raps and produced mostly dance hits, although Jeff is considered a turntable pioneer (he invented the chirp scratch
and was the first to record a transform scratch). Their albums *Rock the House* and *He’s the DJ, I’m the Rapper* also feature beatboxing from Ready Rock C. Together, Jeff and the Fresh Prince go on to star in a television sitcom, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. Smith later stars in films such as *Independence Day* and *I, Robot*.

1988 N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton* becomes a breakthrough gangsta rap album. The album is released by Priority Records but is not supported commercially. Independently, the album sells over 2 million copies underground. MTV does not support the album due to its controversial subject matter. Songs such as “Fuck tha Police” and “Straight Outta Compton” are regarded as threats to law enforcement. The group’s gangsta status is solidified with this album based on their subject matter of violence, guns, and antigovernment rhetoric.

1989 Queen Latifah’s *All Hail the Queen* debuts. “Ladies First” becomes an anthem for women’s rights, projecting a feminist agenda and demanding respect. The song features guest vocals from a British MC, Monie Love.

1989 De La Soul releases *3 Feet High and Rising*. Their eclectic sound samples from country, folk, and rock music and their vibe of love, peace, and knowledge gets them labeled “hippies” and offers an alternative to gangsta rap. They are part of the Native Tongues collective with artists Afrika Bambaataa, Monie Love, Queen Latifah, the Jungle Brothers, and A Tribe Called Quest, to bring positive Afrocentric lyrics to the forefront of hip hop music with hits such as “Me Myself and I.”

1990 The Miami group 2 Live Crew releases the album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, which is the first album in America to be declared legally obscene. Their song “Me So Horny” becomes a hit. The group’s albums receive parental warning labels for sexually graphic content. Their use of the Roland-808 drum machine lays the foundation for the Miami bass sound and much of Southern rap music. 2 Live Crew member Luke Skywewalker (Luther Campbell) is sued by director George Lucas for using the name of a Star Wars character as his stage name. He is forced to change his name to Luke for performances.

1990 Vanilla Ice becomes one of the most successful white rappers in a genre of music dominated by African Americans. His song “Ice Ice Baby” is the best-selling rap record of the year, selling over 15 million copies and pushing MC Hammer out of the top spot on the charts. The song is nominated for a Grammy, but fans turn on Vanilla Ice after journalist Ken Parish Perkins exposes
lies in his official SBK Records artist biography. Ice later appears on reality television programs such as VH-1’s “The Surreal Life.”

1991 Death Row Records is founded by Suge Knight and Dr. Dre in Los Angeles, California. The label houses some of hip hop’s biggest stars, such as Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Tupac, MC Hammer, and many others. Suge Knight becomes famous for his ruthless business savvy and is feared in the music industry because of his alleged unethical business practices. Dr. Dre and Suge work together until Dr. Dre leaves the label to pursue other endeavors in 1996.

1991 A Tribe Called Quest releases its sophomore album, *The Low-End Theory*, a fusion of rap, jazz, and R&B. Their positive style is deemed an alternative to much of the violent and misogynist lyrics in rap music at the time. The popular group joins artists such as De La Soul, Digable Planets, and Arrested Development in creating progressive, positive, and political rap music without gratuitous sex, violence, or obscenities.

1993 Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* goes platinum. Though Dr. Dre had introduced his new protégé Snoop Doggy Dogg on the song “Deep Cover” from the Deep Cover soundtrack, *The Chronic* catapults Snoop to fame and solidifies Dr. Dre’s post-N.W.A. career as a producer and MC. The album’s success sparks a beef with Dre’s former N.W.A. bandmate Eazy-E, who disses Dre and Snoop on his EP *It’s On (Dr. Dre 187um) Killa*.

1993 Conservative activist C. Delores Tucker begins her boycott of rap music. Tupac Shakur and Ice Cube fight back by attacking her in their songs. Reverend Calvin Butts boycotts gangsta rap at station WBLA in NYC.

1993 Wu-Tang Clan releases its debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. In signing with RCA, the nine-member Wu-Tang Clan negotiates an unprecedented deal that allows each member to record freely as a solo artist outside the group’s obligation to RCA.

1993 Queen Latifah’s album *Black Reign* produces the hit “U.N.I.T. Y.,” which wins a Grammy award for Best Solo Performance and positions Latifah as one of the most successful female MCs in hip hop history. She is a rapper, writer, producer, and model, and one of the first rap artists to star in her own television sitcom. Her show, *Living Single*, airs for five years. She also wrote and produced the show’s theme song and served as an executive producer. The show opened up opportunities for Latifah to become one of the most sought-after actresses in
Hollywood. In 2004 she departs from rapping to record a jazz album that also receives critical acclaim.

1994 Tupac Shakur is shot five times in the lobby of a recording studio in New York. Tupac survives, and blames his shooting on Notorious B.I.G. and Bad Boy Records. His shooting starts a rivalry between Bad Boy Records and Tupac’s label, Death Row. The tensions continue to escalate between the two labels and their artist, resulting in several battle songs between artists such as Tupac, Biggie, and others.

1994 The Atlanta-based rap duo Outkast release their debut album *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*. The group consists of Big Boi (Antwan Patton) and Dre (Andre Benjamin). The two artists are known for their eclectic style of dress, their creative use of samples, and retro references to groups like Parliament Funkadelic, Prince, and Sly and the Family Stone. Their original sound, which incorporates Southern drawl, regional references to local color, and fun pop culture samples, marks a break in bicoastal hip hop sound and ushers in a new Southern sound for rap, which influences groups such as Goodie Mob, Joi, and Bubba Sparxxx.

1995 Eazy-E dies of AIDS in Los Angeles, California. The rapper enters the hospital complaining of chest pains and breathing problems and is diagnosed with an advanced form of AIDS. After suffering from AIDS-complicated pneumonia, he slips into a coma and dies just days after he is admitted.

1996 Tupac Shakur is shot in Las Vegas, Nevada while riding in a car with Death Row Records owner Suge Knight. Two men pull up on the car and shoot at the passenger’s side where Tupac is riding. Tupac is shot four times and Suge Knight receives minor injuries. The two are rushed to a local hospital where Tupac dies six days after the shooting. A number of conspiracy theories surround the shooting, including Knight’s involvement in the murder and Tupac’s faking his own death.

1997 Notorious B.I.G. is killed in a drive-by shooting. Biggie was leaving a party hosted by Vibe Magazine. Though many conspiracy theories have linked his death to the East Coast versus West Coast hip hop rivalries, no evidence has been produced to support these claims. Smalls is considered today to be one of the greatest MCs in the history of hip hop music. He is survived by his wife, singer Faith Evans, who sang the chorus on his hit “One More Chance.”

1999 Eminem releases *The Slim Shady LP*, produced by Dr. Dre. The album goes multiplatinum and marks the beginning of a long
history of collaboration between Eminem and Dr. Dre, including *The Marshal Mathers LP* in 2000 and *The Eminem Show* in 2002. Eminem goes on to produce work for several other artists signed to Aftermath including 50 Cent, Missy Elliot, and D-12. Eminem creates his own label, Shady Records, as a result of his success, all under the umbrella of the Interscope records empire.

1999

Lauryn Hill is the first female hip hop artist to be nominated for ten Grammy awards. Her album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998) wins Album of the Year. She wins five of her ten nominations. On February 9, 1999, she also is the first rapper to grace the cover of the politics and news weekly *Time* magazine, dedicated to “The Hip-Hop Nation.” Hill is later sued by groups of songwriters and producers who worked on the album and were not properly credited.

2000–2001

After years of hip hop beefs being solved with bloodshed, Jay-Z and Nas take things back to the old school and fight with MC skills. After one of Jay-Z’s MCs, Memphis Bleek, puts out a sound strikingly similar to Nas’s, a war of words ensues. Nas, the senior of the two rappers, checks the new MC, takes offense, and the battle is on. Jay-Z steps in for Bleek and the fight turns to Nas and Jay-Z battling for the title King of New York. Nas wins by popular vote at a local NYC radio station.

2003

Eminem is the first hip hop artist to win an Oscar. His song “Lose Yourself” from the movie *8 Mile* wins in the Best Song category. He does not attend the awards. Eminem plays the lead role in the film based on his life growing up in Detroit. The film is produced by Brian Grazer, who also produced the hip hop spoof *CB4* featuring Chris Rock.

2005

Hip hop producer-turned-rapper Kanye West graces the cover of *Time* magazine’s August 21, 2005, issue. He chronicles his rise to the top of the hip hop charts in 2004, his debut album *College Dropout*, which sold more than 3 million copies, and his relationship with Roc-a-fella Records. West is later nominated for ten Grammy awards in 2005 and wins three. He steals the show with a performance of his own death and resurrection staged while singing his hit “Jesus Walks.” West produced for artists such as Jay-Z and Cam’ron.

2006

Three 6 Mafia wins a Best Song Oscar for “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp,” featured in the film *Hustle and Flow*. The Memphis rap group is the only rap act in the category, the second rap group ever to win for Best Song, and the first African American
group ever to win in the category. (Eminem won for “Lose Yourself” in 2003.)

2006 Lil’ Kim gets a five-mic rating from The Source magazine for her album The Naked Truth. This is the highest rating for an MC. Kim begins a prison term for lying to a federal grand jury about a 2001 shooting.
Few individuals can claim a life story that so closely parallels hip hop’s narrative arc as Clive Campbell, better known as DJ Kool Herc. Often considered the movement’s founding father and an innovator of the musical and cultural practices that have since swept the world, Kool Herc embodies hip hop’s roots and routes, its booms and busts, its struggles and triumphs. From his childhood in Kingston, Jamaica, to his coming of age in the Bronx, from his rise as a streetwise, peerless DJ to his decline in the wake of hip hop’s new
forms and commercial success, from his drug addiction in the 1980s to his recent return as standard bearer and spokesman, Herc’s tale can be read as a thread running through hip hop history. Although his story has been told and retold and sold many times over, often making it difficult to extract the truth from the myths, the representations, and the press releases, Herc has been generous in granting interviews over the years, and his myriad recollections, as well as those of his peers, provide a strong outline for understanding his role as an architect and inventor, as one who forged so many of the forms we recognize today as hip hop.

TRENCHTOWN ROCK: CLIVE CAMPBELL’S KNOTTY REGGAE ROOTS

Clive Campbell was born in 1955 in Kingston, Jamaica, the first of six children of Keith and Nettie Campbell. He spent his early childhood living in an area of the city known as Trenchtown, the same storied public housing scheme and concrete jungle that produced such reggae luminaries as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Alton Ellis. Clive’s father worked as a foreman at Kingston Wharf garage—a respectable, working-class job that eventually allowed the Campbells to move to Franklyn Town, a lower-middle-class neighborhood where the family had their own house and yard. It was while living in the government yard of Trenchtown, though, that Herc got his first taste of the powerful sound systems he would later emulate as a Bronx-based DJ.

Although Herc has at times denied the influence of Jamaican-style DJing on his own performance practice, arguing that the Bronx audiences he played for demanded a more local style, he has also acknowledged how being a witness to Kingston sound system dances deeply informed his sense of the power of music and of the DJ in particular—not to mention his sense of what was cool (e.g., suavely dressed, well-respected gangsters and rebellious, ratchet-knife-wielding rude boys), as much as that may have needed recalibration upon moving to the Bronx. When asked about his musical influences by a reporter for the Jamaica Observer (Jackson), Herc broke from his typical list of American performers and disc jockeys and instead named such Jamaican greats as Prince Buster, Don Drummond, the Skatalites, Big Youth, U-Roy, and sound system pioneer Clement “Coxsone” Dodd.

It was at these dances—or just outside them (since, due to his age, he often had to settle for spying through holes in the zinc fences that enclosed the dance halls)—where young Clive got his first glimpses of sound system culture. He would watch the sound systems’ crews wheel in speakers and amplifiers on handcarts, the vendors set up their wares and stew up some curry goat, the gangsters and rude boys and dance hall queens strut their stuff before passing through the gate. But then, seeing was often less important than hearing the sound systems at work—and one need not get too close to
hear the selectors and DJs do their thing. Whether Clive was sitting just over
the fence or in his family’s home down the road, there was no avoiding the
engulfing sonic presence of the neighborhood dance. His body vibrating along
with the heavy bass and his ears tickled by the well-designed systems’ crisp
highs and clear midrange frequencies, he developed a taste for the power and
clarity of sound produced by the systems’ custom-crafted components. Later,
seeking to reproduce this aesthetic with his own system in the Bronx, Herc
would distinguish himself from his contemporaries and vanquish his rivals.

Beyond hearing the sound of the systems, of course, Clive also heard the
music they played, as well as their style of playing it. It is worth noting that
Clive left Jamaica before the term *reggae* gained currency and before the style
that it describes emerged from rocksteady, the soul-infused balladeer tradition
that followed ska’s lead out of American influences and into a distinctive
Jamaican synthesis of foreign and familiar styles. So the music that Clive
would have heard emanating from the dance halls in his youth comprised a
mix of exciting, new local forms—often infused with the ebullience of inde-
pendence, granted in 1962—and imported favorites, especially soul and R&B
sides. Although Jamaican popular music increasingly expressed a localized
aesthetic over the course of the 1960s, cover versions of American pop songs
remained staples of the local recording industry, stylistic nods to rock, soul,
and R&B abounded, and the sounds of black America never totally fell out of
favor in the dance halls, though foreign-produced records no longer consti-
tuted the bulk of the sound system repertory as they had in the 1950s. Indeed,
sound system performance practice, for all its uniqueness, can itself be traced
to so-called foreign sources—in particular to African American singers and
disc jockeys, though one might ask, given the prevailing cultural politics of
the day, what would be considered foreign from a Pan-Africanist or Black
Power perspective.

By the mid-1960s, Kingston’s mobile sound systems had already eclipsed a
long-standing tradition of live band performance in Jamaica. Although the
island’s talented musicians continued to contribute crucially to the creation of
Jamaican music, after the rise of the sound systems many musicians found
themselves working in recording studios to produce the very recordings that
would be played at local dances. The success of the sound systems was due in
part to the entrepreneurial acumen of early soundmen such as Coxsone Dodd
and Duke Reid, both of whom parlayed their success throwing dances and
parties into their own music industry mini-empires, building recording stu-
dios, pressing records (at first for dances and later for sale to the public), and
establishing labels with international audiences and musical legacies that con-
tinue well into today’s digital dance hall world. When Dodd first began
playing the latest, hottest R&B records for patrons of his parents’ liquor
store, soon expanding the operation to a makeshift dance hall, what he was
doing looked a lot like what Herc would do in the Bronx years later. And
when Dodd hired King Stitt to talk over the records, shouting out friends and
associates, bigging up the sound system itself, and exhorting the audience to
dance and buy food and drinks, Stitt sounded a lot like Herc and his partner
(and fellow Jamaican immigrant) Coke La Rock would later sound.

Of course, King Stitt’s performances were steeped in the same Jamaican
slang and patois poetics that Kool Herc and Coke La Rock would largely
have to shed in order to reach their Bronx peers. And Stitt was called a DJ, not
an MC—despite the fact that he rarely, if ever, operated the turntable. (In
Jamaican parlance, the person who actually plays the records, cueing them up
and pulling them up, is called the selector.) Stitt’s designation as a DJ, though
—and the continued use of the term DJ to describe a nonsinging vocalist in
Jamaica—makes an important connection between Jamaican sound system
practice, early hip hop performance, and the main influence that both forms
share: African American radio disc jockeys and their jive-talking, rhyme-
slinging, rhythm-rolling style. Having for years tuned into American radio
broadcasts that could reach Jamaica from as far north as Memphis or
Cincinnati, the earliest Jamaican DJs borrowed liberally from the smooth
signatures, scat singing, and catchy cadences of radio legends such as New
Orleans-based Vernon “Dr. Daddy-O” Winslow and his many followers
across the South, not to mention such influential figures as Tommy “Dr. Jive”
Smalls and Douglas “Jocko” Henderson. In something of an ironic twist,
Herc and Coke La Rock would later synthesize what they had absorbed from
these Jamaican versions of African American disc jockey performance with
the New York–based descendents of the same models, including such white
disc jocks as Wolfman Jack and Cousin Brucie, both of whom Herc cites as
early influences on both his talkover style and his American accent. Rather
than riding the beat with a constant flow of syncopated syllables as rappers
have since the late seventies, Jamaica’s DJs of the sixties and early seventies
and hip hop’s earliest DJs and MCs would pepper songs with short phrases,
often in the form of rhyming couplets, employing the latest slang (including
scat-filled routines), and often in a relatively free manner—that is, without
relating too directly to the rhythm of the track playing on the turntable (but
frequently connecting to the track’s theme or to specific lyrics or connotations
the song may have).

Thus Herc’s exposure to American music far preceded his actual move to
the United States at age twelve. In addition to hearing popular R&B and soul
songs on the radio and at sound system events (never mind Jamaican versions
of these songs and styles), he also heard such music at home, for his father’s
collection included records by Nina Simone, Nat King Cole, and country
singer Jim Reeves, while his mother had been sending the family the latest
James Brown and Motown records, among other soul and pop fare, since she
moved to New York in the mid-sixties. Like many a Jamaican migrant, Nettie
Campbell was also sending money to her family, working as a dental techni-
cian while attending nursing school. She would soon send for her eldest son,
who would eventually be followed by his siblings and father. When Clive
arrived in New York on a cold winter night in 1967, he may not have realized how useful his practice sessions with his parents’ records would turn out to be.

THE BOOGIE-DOWN BRONX AND CLIVE’S KOOL NEW ACCENT

Although the number of West Indian residents grew steadily in New York during the late sixties and throughout the seventies, due in part to British anti-immigration acts passed in the sixties and the U.S. 1965 Immigration Act, which abolished national origins as the basis for immigration legislation, Clive Campbell’s experience shows that a critical mass had not yet crystallized so that borough culture could reflect such foreign infusions as Jamaican-ness or so that notions of blackness could include Anglo-Caribbean or Latin Caribbean versions. Far from the aura of quasi-exotic cool that it carries today, being Jamaican in the Bronx during the 1970s carried such a stigma that some young immigrants found it better to conceal their backgrounds. Not only would Clive have to lose his accent to fit in among his new peers, he would have to lose his “hick” clothing as well, including the boots, or “roach killers,” for which he was ridiculed at school. Although Clive denies that he ever hid his Jamaicanness, he puts the situation in perspective by recalling a particularly telling example of how this harassment would play out in his new neighborhood: “At that time [the early 1970s], being Jamaican wasn’t fashionable. Bob Marley didn’t come through yet to make it more fashionable, to even give a chance for people to listen to our music. . . . I remember one time a guy said, ‘Clive, man, don’t walk down that way cause they throwing Jamaicans in garbage cans’” (Chang 72). Of course, for a young man in a working-class family, adopting a new accent was, in a certain sense, a lot easier than finding a new wardrobe.

Having honed something of an American accent by singing along to his parents’ records, Clive continued to mold his voice upon moving to the Bronx, tuning to the distinctively American enunciations of Cousin Brucie and Wolfman Jack as well as their African American contemporaries, including Chuck Leonard and Frankie Crocker, on such stations as WWRL, New York’s most popular “black music” station at that time. Adjusting his accent to be intelligible to classmates, by the time he began attending classes and playing sports at Alfred E. Smith High School, few of his peers would have identified Clive as a Jamaican—or even thought about throwing him in a garbage can. Indeed, a prodigious weight lifter, a track medalist, and a fierce basketball player who could dunk the ball with ease, Clive Campbell, standing over six feet tall at this point, would soon be crowned with the first part of his new name: “Herc,” short for Hercules.

The “Kool” part of Clive’s new name arose from his early adventures as a graffiti writer. Running with a crew called the Ex-Vandals, alongside such
soon-to-be legends as Phase 2, Super Kool, and El Marko, Clive originally adopted the tag Clyde as Kool since “Clive”—not an uncommon name in Jamaica—continued to serve as yet another marker of his foreignness. Because so many of his peers would call him by the more familiar Clyde, he eventually embraced it himself. And as seen in the name of fellow crewmember Super Kool, the term Kool (with a k) had already attained no small currency among Herc’s peers. Clive himself identifies the special spelling with the cigarette brand that bears the same name and specifically with a television commercial for the brand that so exuded cool (with a c) that Clive was inspired to adopt the appellation. So “Clyde as Kool” morphed into “Kool Herc.” It was a name both chosen by Clive and suggested by his peers, a name that seemed to symbolize Clive’s new Bronx self, and a name—especially given its recognition value as a local graffiti tag—that would soon serve him well as a self-promoting DJ. (He would bill himself, and be billed, alternately as Kool DJ Herc, which—as evidenced by predecessors such as Pete DJ Jones—was a common way to designate oneself a DJ at the time, and as DJ Kool Herc, which is now the more conventional form. Similar to naming practices among reggae artists, one hears echoes of Herc in the names of subsequent DJs such as Kool DJ AJ and Kool DJ Red Alert.)

For all its modesty, Kool Herc’s first party has become an event of mythic proportions. A back-to-school fund-raiser for his sister Cindy, it was held in August 1973 in the community center or rec room of the building where the Campbells lived: 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the West Bronx. Knowing that her brother had DJ ambitions and, moreover, that he knew how to get the most out of their father’s powerful PA system, Cindy asked Herc to DJ the party. In preparation, Herc bought about twenty new records to add to his small but growing collection. An astute observer of local party dynamics since his mother began taking him to events around New York in the late sixties, Herc had developed a fine sense of what a young Bronx crowd would want to hear. This did not stop him, however, from attempting to represent his roots by dropping some of the “big tunes” that would have sent a dance in Kingston into a frenzy. But at that time in New York, a time when West Indian immigrants could be singled out for cruel harassment, Jamaican music was still shunned as too “country” or degraded as “jungle music” by many African Americans, a good number of whom, as first-or second-generation rural migrants from the South, still sought to distance themselves from a “hick” past. When Herc’s reggae selections were received coolly, the savvy young DJ played the sort of soul and funk hits, full of Latin-tinged percussion breaks, that he knew would go over well among his West Bronx peers. Thus the same chameleonic process that Herc embraced to change his accent, his name, and his sense of self now extended to his performance practice as he adapted Jamaican sound system techniques for his funk-oriented audience, shouting out and bigging up the crowd in local slang over the records people wanted to hear. The strategy worked: The room filled with young dancers and a feeling
of exuberance; Cindy made enough money to buy herself a new set of clothes; and a buzz went out across the West Bronx about DJ Kool Herc, his serious sound system, and his funky record collection.

As word spread, soon the Campbells were filling the rec room on a regular basis, and new possibilities opened up for the young entrepreneurs. The parties’ attendees were—especially at first—relatively young, many of them high school students. As a new generation of kids who had largely managed to escape the height of gang violence in the Bronx but who inhabited a decaying, dangerous environment all the same, they were eager to find a relatively safe place for the sort of recreation Herc was offering. As less violent, though often no less competitive, style wars increasingly supplanted gang wars among Bronx youth, Herc’s parties seemed to herald a cultural sea change for the borough. By the summer of 1974, Herc was throwing block parties on Sedgwick Avenue, attracting a sizeable, multigenerational following and often playing until daybreak. When the crowds grew too large for the block, Herc moved the party up to Cedar Park at 179th Street and Sedgwick, tapping into the city’s power supply, and thus began the storied parties in the park that have been commemorated in hip hop lyrics ever since. By 1975, after a number of successful all-ages dances at the Webster PAL (Police Athletic League), Herc was playing regularly in clubs, beginning with a gig at the Twilight Zone so impressive in its draw that he was offered a weekly residency at the Hevalo, a venue that not long before had shooed Herc away for passing out fliers. As demand for Herc grew, he would go on to play at many of hip hop’s early hot spots: the T-Connection, the Sparkle (formerly the Executive Playhouse), the Audubon, the Monterey Center, the Godfather’s Club, and the Galaxy 2000. Notably, although most of the clubs had their own sound, Herc would always bring in his own indomitable system, which, in a nod to a Hanna-Barbera cartoon, he had dubbed the Herculoids.

Along with the Herculoids, Kool Herc was also usually accompanied by the Herculords, a group of supporters and performers who assisted him in various ways. Among the Herculords were such DJs and DJ/MCs (since they often handled both turntable and microphone duties) as Coke La Rock, Clark Kent, Timmy Tim, LeBrew, and the Imperial JC. Herc also had a number of women in the crew, among them some of the first female MCs: Pebblee-Poo, Sweet and Sour, and Smiley. Many of the Herculords—male and female—also doubled as dancers, providing an instant critical mass when it was time to get things going. This was the dawn of what became known in the eighties as break dancing, though the local term was b-boying, named after the b-boys (alternately defined as “break boys,” “beat boys,” “Bronx boys,” “Boogie Boys,” etc.) whom Herc would specifically encourage to dance when he played the popular, percussive breaks from the day’s funk hits. Ever the embodiment of hip hop, Herc himself had background as a dancer, having gotten down in his younger days at such spots as the Puzzle, an experience which no doubt informed his selections as a DJ. (Once he assumed the role of
soundman, however, he tended to stay behind the boards—except on occasions when he would watch the door to make sure the money was flowing as it should.) In addition to these multifaceted performers, the Herculords also included a number of devoted dancers, among them some of the earliest and most accomplished b-boys: Sau Sau, Tricksy, and the Nigger Twins (aka Keith and Kevin, later known simply as the Twins).

By 1976, Kool Herc and the Herculords/Herculoids were the toast of the Bronx. He had developed an iconic style to match his status, having graduated from wearing “roach killers” to sporting dress shoes and sharp slacks, leather jackets and fur coats, and, when he wasn’t rocking a medium-sized Afro, a signature cowboy hat and big, round, dark sunglasses. On Herc’s hulking frame, hip hop’s larger-than-life fashion sense seemed to find the perfect model. Herc and his crew attracted audiences from across the borough and beyond, including some curious, young upstarts (such as Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash) who would eventually challenge Herc’s dominance. They would only do so, though, by beating Herc at his own game, for, by this point, he had set the template for what was beginning to be called hip hop.

HOW HERC BECAME A HIP HOP HERO: SOUND, SELECTION, AND STYLE

The three main qualities that came to define Herc’s style—and, later, that of hip hop DJs more generally—were already present when he threw his first party: (1) his sound, that is, the system through which he played his records; (2) his selection, that is, the repertory of records he played; and (3) his style, that is, the way he played the records.

Herc’s sound system was simply incontestable. Of course, he had the good fortune to have a father who decided to sponsor a local R&B group and so had purchased a Shure PA system and a mighty Macintosh amplifier to power it. When Herc figured out how to wire the system properly and really make it pump, his father was so grateful that rather than punishing him for playing with the prohibited equipment, he proposed a father-and-son business, allowing Herc to use the system for his parties while enlisting him to play between breaks at the R&B group’s shows. With incomparably heavy bass, sparkling highs, and clear mids (i.e., middle-range frequencies), Herc would taunt any fellow DJs who dared show up at his parties, sometimes emphasizing the separate frequency bands while discussing his system’s strengths. In terms of sheer sonic presence, none of Herc’s colleagues could compete. He famously drowned out Afrika Bambaataa at an early battle, embarrassing and upstaging the East Bronx challenger. And although Disco King Mario was known for a similarly superb system, he traveled in different circles than Herc and his presence was rarely felt in the hip hop scene—with the notable exception of the time Mario loaned Bambaataa an amp for a battle with an easily vanquished
DJ Breakout. Having such a system also meant that Herc was not a DJ for hire: He was a soundman with his own system and he needed neither promoters nor club owners to help him do his thing, throw his parties, run his business.

Like many of his enterprising peers, Herc also invested a good deal of his early earnings back into his system, maintaining a state-of-the-art edge over his competitors. Although hip hop’s myth of origins often emphasizes the crushing poverty of the Bronx and the resourcefulness of young people who, abandoned by the state and the system, made do with what was available, such a story also tends to downplay the degree to which hip hop’s pioneers borrowed and hustled and saved in order to obtain what they needed to make their art and their living. Often what they needed, such as turntables and sound systems, was not easily available and did not come cheap. It was largely through hard work, family assistance, and entrepreneurial acumen that such trailblazers as Kool Herc built a system, a culture, and, if so fortunate, a stream of steady revenue.

If anything could rival Herc’s sound system, it was his impeccable record selection. Herc quickly earned a reputation as a DJ with singular taste. Rather than the commercial confections that found favor on the radio and in the clubs throughout the seventies, Herc played more obscure records: good, hard, funky music that, for him and his neighbors, seemed to tap more directly into the zeitgeist. It was no coincidence that the music Herc and his peers wanted to hear was the music of Black Power, of militant pride, and of continued calls for social and economic justice in the post-Civil Rights era. Notably, these were not the songs one typically heard at that time on the radio, even on “black radio,” which increasingly devoted its programming to disco and other styles associated with the upwardly mobile black middle class. As “black and proud” artists and bandleaders such as James Brown refined soul and R&B into a sparer, harder style that came to be called funk, tightening up the rhythms and focusing on riffs and repetition, one common feature of such songs that caught the imagination of the listening (and dancing) public—especially the b-boys of the Bronx—was the use of bare-bones, percussion-heavy, in-the-pocket drum breaks (i.e., solo passages during which the drummer would accentuate and play with but not diverge too far from the basic beat). Such breaks often took the place of the instrumental solo in rock or pop or jazz, occurring after the second chorus or the bridge, though sometimes they constituted a much larger portion of a track. Rather than a melody-based solo, as was conventional in previous pop genres, funk breaks were rhythm-centric passages, performed on drum kits and hand drums—typically, the bongos and congas that had been absorbed into American music via Latin Caribbean traditions—and occasionally featuring a bass line and/or regular riffs or hits from other instruments in the ensemble. These breaks—soon to be known around the Bronx as breakbeats—emerged as a staple of the genre, and b-boys would save their most impressive, acrobatic, and competitive routines for these explosive moments.
Always a keen observer of dance party dynamics, Herc noticed the excitement such breaks could generate. It was an insight that would lead to Herc’s major aesthetic innovation: the isolation and repetition of the breaks. He began to seek out records simply for their breakbeats, regardless of whether the rest of the song was something one would want to hear. Like his Jamaican sound system predecessors, Herc attracted an audience that came specifically to hear his special selection of records. Similarly, one might compare Herc’s battery of breakbeats to Coxsone Dodd’s catalog of riddims, the instrumental tracks recorded at Dodd’s Studio One in the late sixties that have served as the basis for an enormous number of reggae recordings. Herc’s “breaks records” not only came to constitute what is essentially a b-boy canon, they also established the foundational repertory of the hip hop DJ. Because so many subsequent DJs sought out the same records they heard played by Herc, a great number of these tracks—many of them relatively obscure, though many of them hits—now stand as touchstones of early hip hop. Moreover, these same breaks became favorites of sample-based hip hop producers in the eighties and nineties, further affirming their status and ingraining their familiar rhythms and timbres in the hip hop imagination. Though it may take a hip hop or funk aficionado to recognize many of the names on these records, they have so deeply permeated the sound of modern hip hop, pop, and electronic music that few would find their strains unfamiliar. Some of Herc’s favorites included the following: James Brown’s “Give It Up or Turnit a Loose” (and other cuts from Sex Machine), Booker T and the MGs’ “Melting Pot,” Michael Viner’s Incredible Bongo Band’s “Bongo Rock” and “Apache,” Babe Ruth’s “The Mexican,” Baby Huey’s “Listen to Me,” Dennis Coffee’s “Scorpio,” Mandrill’s “Fencewalk,” Jimmy Castor’s “It’s Just Begun,” Bob James’s “Take Me to the Mardi Gras,” Aretha Franklin’s “Rock Steady,” and Rare Earth’s “Get Ready.”

Although Herc was known for letting records play before and beyond their breaks (sometimes, to the consternation of some observers, including the wack or undesirable parts, or all the way to the end of a track), perhaps his most lasting legacy is the practice of isolating and extending these breakbeats, transforming the fleeting, funky moments into loops that could last for many minutes. Eventually, by employing two turntables and two copies of a record, Herc developed what he called the merry-go-round technique. Dropping the needle back to the beginning of the break on one record just as the other was about to end, and repeating the process ad infinitum, Herc could keep a break—and a crowd of b-boys—breaking for as long as that particular section would work. Though the hip hop story has enshrined Herc as the first to isolate and repeat breakbeats in this way, it should be noted that Herc’s technical proficiency was never exactly heralded, and so his focus on and liberation of the break should perhaps be understood more as an aesthetic than a technical achievement. Later DJs, such as Grandmaster Flash, influenced by Herc’s model but more virtuosic in their control over the turntables
and mixer, would improve on the formula, moving beyond drop-the-needle imprecision by backspinning, scratching, and cutting the records while cueing them via monitoring headphones, thus allowing one to mix breaks more seamlessly into one another and to isolate shorter and shorter sections for repetition (see sidebar: The Mixtape).

As an element of style, Herc’s less-than-seamless stop-and-start approach to selection draws yet another connection to reggae performance practice.

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**The Mixtape**

*Shamika Ann Mitchell*

There is a distinction between a private mixtape audiocassette, which is usually intended for a specific listener or private social event, and a public mixtape, or party tape. While the former usually has sentimental value (they are often given as expressions of affection), the latter consists of a live recording of a club performance by a DJ. Originally, cassette tapes (reel-to-reel, cartridge, and audiocassette) were dubbed by DJs to serve as a standby or segue between songs, but hip hop DJs forever changed the meaning and significance of the mixtape. In hip hop’s founding years, there was no major media outlet for the music; radio stations or programs, magazines, television programs, and even professional recordings with a hip hop format were nonexistent. In response to this void, mixtapes became the platform to give the music exposure. Also, because these artists did not have recording contracts, the mixtapes became a source of revenue for the DJs. In the 1970s, pioneer hip hop DJs such as Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, and DJ Hollywood would often sell recordings of their club performances via mixtapes. In addition to live performance recordings, some DJs would also make customized mixtapes. These custom mixtapes were often pricey (as high as $1 per minute in some cases) but highly collectible.

The mixtape begins its evolution in the late seventies and early eighties, and DJs started featuring rappers or MCs, sometimes featuring more rapping than DJ mixes of popular or original songs. Although in the 1980s hip hop was often labeled a fad, it was slowly becoming established as a recording industry with a legitimate fan base, which was to the advantage for hip hop DJs in particular. Hip hop–based media outlets were still slow to come (except for some major cities), which provided a market for mixtapes. It was not until the 1990s that making and selling mixtapes became a full-fledged business for the hip hop DJ. DJs were able to use their mixtapes to establish a brand or trademark of their music. While some DJs were a draw because of their mixing abilities, others were popular for their exclusive access to unreleased songs by artists. The first mixtape DJ to have a recording contract with a major label was Kid Capri, who released his first album, *The Tape*, in 1991 on the Cold Chillin’/Warner Brothers label. Several other DJs have since followed suit, including Funkmaster Flex, DJ Clue, DJ Kay Slay, and DJ S&S.
Whereas hip hop DJing—partly related to its roots in disco and the club scene—has since developed in a manner that privileges smooth, beat-matched transitions between tracks, reggae selecting has remained a style more defined by stark cuts and mixes. This is often the case even when a selector is juggling, or mixing sequentially, several songs on the same underlying riddim: when a popular song receives requests for a pull up, the selector rewinds it, usually suddenly and audibly, and lets it play again. Reggae-style selecting arises partly out of the constraints of using a single turntable, which is another reason that talkover-style DJs played an important role, filling in between songs and keeping the audience’s attention rapt. Such an approach, like Herc’s own orientation, prizes the effect that a popular song or “big tune” will have, seeking to repeat this effect again and again, rather than the effect that a series of smoothly mixed songs would achieve over the course of an evening. Further, one might hear Herc’s emphasis on drum and bass, the isolated elements in so many breaks, as another connection to the reggae tradition, which has long cherished the power of sparse, heavy grooves. And, of course, the storied technique of soaking records in the bathtub to remove their labels in order to stop competitors from “stealing” one’s signature songs is another practice that hip hop’s pioneers borrowed from their Jamaican precursors. Indeed, it was Herc’s father, well familiar with sound system lore, who advised him to protect the identity of his records in this manner and thus protect his cache with a clientele who came explicitly to hear Herc’s special selections. (Grandmaster Flash gives a conflicting account, claiming he was the first hip hop DJ to use this technique.) Finally, Herc’s use of effects, especially the echo and reverb he famously, and generously, applied to his and his fellow DJs’ and MCs’ vocals, also appears to have been inspired by sound system style and dub reggae aesthetics.

Despite paying respects to Jamaican originators and considering hip hop and reggae to be cousins, Herc himself has denied that reggae-style DJing informed his own approach (see sidebar: Hip hop and Reggae). When asked whether Jamaican “toasting,” a term often used to describe early reggae DJ/talkover style, had any influence on his performance practice, Herc typically disavows any such thing, noting that he could not play reggae in the Bronx, and instead credits African American vocalists such as James Brown or Jalal Nuriddin of the Last Poets, the proto-rapper on Hustler’s Convention (1973),

For the discriminating consumer, mixtapes now come in varieties. In addition to the aforementioned exclusives, mixtapes will also highlight a DJ’s ability to mix by blending beats from one song with the vocals from another. Freestyles or unscripted rhymes from a respected rapper are also popular attractions. Arguably, the most interesting evolutionary aspect of the mixtape is that it is now released only in CD format; however, the term mixtape remains a permanent fixture.
Hip Hop and Reggae
Wayne Marshall

Although histories of hip hop typically begin by acknowledging Jamaican-born Kool Herc as founding father, they often proceed as if Jamaicans stopped moving to New York or infusing hip hop with West Indian accents, ragga-muffin flows, and dub aesthetics. A closer listen reveals a sustained, if not intensifying, relationship between hip hop and reggae. Not long after the release of the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979, dance hall DJs Welton Irie and General Echo recorded their own reggae-inflected versions of the song. And New York-based rappers were making militant references to “I and I” and Bob Marley as early as 1980 on Brother D and Collective Effort’s “How We Gonna Make the Black Nation Rise.” By 1985, rap’s most commercially successful groups, such as Run-DMC and the Fat Boys, were incorporating reggae into their songs.

On 1987’s Criminal Minded, Scott LaRock sampled classic riddims while KRS-One borrowed dance hall melodies for his verses and hooks and peppered his rhymes with a heavy dose of patois—in the process driving a number of reggae references deep into the hip hop lexicon. In the late 1980s, a slew of fast-rapping, flip-tongue DJs such as Daddy Freddy and Asher D were innovating a hybrid style called ragga-muffin hip hop that would echo in the raggity-riggity rhymes of Brooklyn-based acts such as Das EFX and the Fu-Schnickens in the 1990s, not to mention 1990s pop phenomenons and “miggity-macks” like Kriss Kross or LA-based acts like the D.O.C. and his producer, the “diggy-diggy” Dr. Dre. Considering that New York and Miami have been among the biggest sites of Jamaican-U.S. migration, it’s not surprising to hear 2 Live Crew rap about punaany and reference various dance hall hits on their “Reggae Joint” (1989), but even such quintessentially West Coast releases as Dre’s The Chronic (1992) features patois interludes and ragga-muffin flows (listen to Daz on the chorus of “Lil’ Ghetto Boy”).

Top reggae releases have been staples in hip hop DJs’ crates since at least the early eighties, but the early nineties saw a surge of dance hall hits enter the hip hop canon, including tracks by Chaka Demus & Pliers, Shabba Ranks, Super Cat, Cutty Ranks, and Buju Banton (many of whom also issued hip hop remixes of their most popular songs), while the early 2000s have introduced stateside listeners to hip hop–generation dance hall DJs such as Sean Paul, Beenie Man, Vybz Kartel, Sizzla, and Elephant Man (a number of whom have been signed to hip hop labels). In the wake of these crossover waves, hip hop artists have increasingly incorporated reggae style into their own local lingo. Again, certain centers of the Jamaican diaspora such as Brooklyn (and New York more generally) have played host to the most dance hall–derived flows. Reflecting their cities’ reggae-infused soundscapes, acts such as Smif-N-Wessun (aka the Cocoa Brovaz), Heltah Skeltah (and the Boot Camp Clik more generally), Biggie Smalls, Busta Rhymes, A Tribe Called Quest, Black Star...
with providing the inspiration for rap’s vocal styles. Even so, descriptions of Herc’s and his Herculord comrades’ vocalizations often paint them more akin to such reggae DJs as U-Roy than to the rhythm-riding MCs of the late seventies, such as Cowboy and Melle Mel, Busy Bee and Grandmaster Caz, who are generally acknowledged as among the first rappers. In contrast to these early MCs’ beat-centric approach, strewing syllables on strong beats and syncopated accents alike and often rhyming on the final beat of each measure, Kool Herc and Coke La Rock were known for declaiming more freely over the beat. Employing short stock phrases, often in the form of rhymed couplets, and with improvised references to the situation at hand, Herc and the Herculords would shout out their own names and those of their friends, urge b-boys to dance, and project their larger-than-life, cooler-than-cool personas through the latest local slang and catch phrases: “Rock on, my mellow!” “To the beat, y’all!” “You don’t stop!”

Although it seems likely that many of Herc’s techniques were inspired by his acquaintance with Jamaican sound system style, similarities between his approach to DJing/MCing and reggae selector/DJ methods might, in the end, be better understood as a product of the common roots of the two—such as African American disc jockey practice—than any sort of intentional synthesis. It is possible both to underestimate and overstate the degree to which Jamaican practices informed hip hop, and so Herc’s reluctance to embrace a reggae-centric myth of origins is instructive. Indeed, a number of hip hop historians have distorted the picture at times, falsely asserting the Jamaicanness of Grandmaster Flash (whose parents are Bajan) and Afrika Bambaataa (of mixed Bajan and Jamaican parentage) and even the Incredible Bongo Band (which featured Nassau-born bongo player King Errisson among the studio musicians assembled by bandleader Michael Viner, but no Jamaicans; interestingly, their “Apache” was re-issued by a Jamaican record label, perhaps sowing the confusion). Herc has not let his interviewers forget how difficult it was for a boy in the Bronx to be Jamaican in the early seventies. He has repeatedly underscored the Americanness and African Americanness of hip hop. Given his commitment to teasing out the truth amid such complex cultural circumstances, Herc’s testimony offers the readers and writers of hip hop’s narrative a number of insights into how hip hop’s cultural politics and modes of expression differed from those of reggae, funk, rock, and disco, among other contemporary formations.
FROM OLD SCHOOL TO NEW GUARD: THE CHALLENGES OF COMMERCIALIZATION

In the early and mid-1970s, Kool Herc’s style—from his mobile sound system to his break-laden selections to his slang-steeped talkover—distinguished him from local competitors as well as from the rapping-and-mixing disco DJs of the club scene, but as a new generation of DJs and MCs borrowed (and in some cases, improved upon) Herc’s techniques and as hip hop proved to be a commercially viable music genre in its own right, Herc found himself increasingly out of the limelight and unable to adapt to or capitalize on what amounted to a serious shift for hip hop.

Perceptions of an underground/commercial divide in hip hop long predate the advent of recorded rap as popularized by the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979 (see sidebar: Underground Hip Hop). Whereas disco DJ luminaries, such as Pete DJ Jones and DJ Hollywood, catered to an older audience in the clubs of the Bronx and other boroughs, Herc and his ilk were seen as representing the street, playing to young, high school age audiences in

Underground Hip Hop
H. C. Williams

In hip hop, the term underground is a medal of honor. Artists who sign with independent labels seek to avoid the corporatization of hip hop, and typically identify themselves as underground. For them, it is more important to be true to the music rather than selling out to the recording industry—though, admittedly, in the independent label there is still a world of merchandising and promotion. Hieroglyphics is an underground group but they still tour internationally and sell DVDs, T-shirts, and posters like commercial hip hop groups. In this sense, underground hip hop is just a smaller version of the corporate world, yet underground artists do tend to maintain more control over the production and marketing of their music, which affords them more control over their sound and style.

Underground artists focus on the presentation of personal style to gain clout and support as well as develop an audience. It is through style that they get their music into circulation rather than through music videos. It is crucial to understand that “underground” signifies not just rappers (MCs), but also DJs, break dancers, and graffiti artists. For these other artists, style is their key to that medal of honor. Unfortunately, even in the underground these other artists do not receive the same publicity as MCs.

One characteristic of underground hip hop is the rapper’s approach to his or her topic, which is deeper than the ideas of rims, bitches, and hoes, and the shimmering bling around necks and fingers that are hot topics of recent commercial rap. However, just as the hardships of growing up poor surface
in commercial rap, this idea of deprivation appears frequently in underground hip hop—but the underground artist does not mention privation offhandedly. If the MC discusses a harsh upbringing, it will likely be the focus of the track. Where mainstream MCs such as Jay-Z use their impoverished backgrounds to build rags-to-riches success stories, underground MCs often continue to promote their poverty as a sign that they remain true to the underground and haven’t sold out.

Many underground artists might say they differ from the artists who appear on TV because they remain true to the roots of hip hop, or those musical and fashion styles or performance values that are old school. Along with serving as a way to showcase one’s style, hip hop was originally the means by which the underprivileged usually male youth vented his frustration with the system and the way that system withheld from him and those like him the opportunity to achieve in a corporate world. Immortal Technique addresses this problem in “Harlem Streets” from the album Revolutionary Vol. 2. Non Phixion also express their contempt for the system in the album The Future Is Now; especially on the track “There Is No Future.”

Although corporations have commodified hip hop, using rap to sell shoes and cell phones, some artists refuse the money and fame to keep alive the old-school ideals of hip hop. Whether the artist is keeping it real by refusing to cede control to the recording industry, maintaining loyalty to old-school hip hop, or staking his or her claim to the best rhyme style rather than the most expensive jewelry, underground hip hoppers are proud to be called so and would be offended if they were mistaken for supporters of commercial hip hop.
The combination would prove a winning one, in the mass market and the street alike, leaving behind originators such as Herc while moving hip hop into unforeseen territory.

Hip hop’s second generation took the template that Herc had so solidly set and ran with it. Afrika Bambaataa followed in Herc’s footsteps by amassing a record collection unparalleled in terms of eclectic, electric breakbeats, while Grandmaster Flash elevated the art of DJing far beyond merry-go-round needle dropping, building on the innovations of Grandwizard Theodore—generally credited with having discovered and refined the practice of scratching—in order to scratch, cut, and mix his selections with punch and precision, sometimes while spinning around or using body parts other than his hands. As other DJs and crews such as the L Brothers (featuring Grandwizard Theodore), DJ Breakout, and Baron (of Funky 4 fame), and Kool DJ AJ made the field an increasingly competitive one, showmanship and technical skill grew in importance as ways to distinguish one’s act from the pack. MCs as well as DJs had to sharpen their skills and refine their acts to make a name for themselves, especially as the men and women on the microphones, rather than the turntables, became the new focal point for hip hop performance. As big name DJs such as Flash literally placed their MCs in the foreground at parties and shows, moving them from behind the DJ table to the front of the stage, MCs began to develop more elaborate routines. Relieved of any DJ duties, MCs developed their storehouses of shout-outs and rhymes into longer verses (both composed and improvised) and sometimes into full songs and group routines, enhanced with choreography, matching uniforms, and props of various kinds.

MCs became the focus of attention and the primary draw for audiences, outshining the DJs who, nonetheless, often retained the top name on marquees and fliers. Drawing on the smooth and steady rap style of disco DJs, the proto-rap spiel of the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, various other American and African American oral traditions (including, as mentioned above, radio disc jockey practice), and refining and further stylizing the street style of the Herculords, MCs such as Cowboy and Melle Mel, who worked with Flash and later comprised half of the Furious Four, advanced the art of MCing in their performances, riding the beat more explicitly and developing increasingly sophisticated rhyme schemes and group routines. These more intricate, showy performances were often saved for later in the evening, with the early hours of the party still focusing on the DJ and his selections and featuring short, often improvised exhortations from the MCs.

Before long the number of MCs and crews of rappers exploded. Kid Creole and Scorpio rounded out the Furious Four before being joined by Raheim (who defected from the Funky 4 after losing a battle to Flash’s crew) to become the Furious Five. K.K. Rockwell, Keith Keith, Jazzy Jeff (a different artist than Philadelphia’s DJ Jazzy Jeff, who worked with the Fresh Prince), Rodney Cee, and Busy Bee made up the rotating cast known as the Funky 4 (or the Funky 4+1 when pioneering female MC Sha Rock joined them).
Grandmaster Caz, formerly known as DJ Casanova Fly, commanded the microphone and turntables alongside DJ Disco Wiz before forming a group called Mighty Force with Whipper Whip and Dot-a-Rock (both of whom would later help comprise the Cold Crush Brothers and then the Fantastic 5). Caz developed a strong set of rhymes and routines during this period, a number of which found their way into Sugarhill Gang’s breakthrough single (including the line “I’m the C-A-S-A-N the O-V-A and the rest is F-L-Y,” spelling Caz’s former tag). As the story goes, Big Bank Hank, despite not being an MC himself, was approached by Silvia Robinson of Sugar Hill Records to record some of the rhymes she heard him reciting at a pizzeria where he was working. Because Hank was serving as a manager and promoter for Caz and Mighty Force, he already knew many of Caz’s rhymes—as did many hip hop devotees at that time—and he had privileged access to Caz. Not realizing the record would be an enormous hit, Caz allegedly gave Hank free reign to pick through his rhyme book, and with their smash single the Sugarhill Gang soon outstripped all other MC crews in terms of notoriety. Some twenty years later, Caz would record “MC’s Delight,” an attempt to set the historical record straight.

Caz’s influence as an MC did not stop with Sugarhill Gang’s appropriation of his well-known rhymes, for his work with the Cold Crush Brothers served to push the art of MCing to greater heights of wordplay and into flashy, well-rehearsed routines. Invited by DJ Charlie Chase to help with auditions for Cold Crush, Caz was convinced to join the group himself. Alongside Charlie Chase, DJ Tony Tone, Easy AD, Almighty Kay Gee, and Jerry Dee Lewis (JDL), Caz helped forge a distinctive group style for Cold Crush, involving intricate, back-and-forth interplay between the MCs and melodic, sing-along passages that often found the members harmonizing together. The high theater of the Cold Crush Brothers’ performances presented a formidable challenge to rival crews such as the Fantastic 5, and their rapid-fire, interlaced rhymes carried forward into the dynamic routines of such acts as Run-DMC—as well as more recent groups, such as Jurassic 5, who essentially serve as a living tribute to Cold Crush style.

The late seventies also saw the rise of a number of strong female MCs. Joining the eminent Sha Rock on the scene were Lisa Lee (who played with Bambaataa and who, along with Debbie D and Sha Rock would later form the trio Us Girls), Little Lee (who worked with DJ AJ), and Herc’s mainstays Pebblee-Poo, Sweet and Sour, and Smiley. A few women got into the DJ business as well, among them DJ Wanda D (an early member of Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation) and Pambaataa (who was ushered into the scene by Grandmaster Caz). Like many minority members of the early hip hop scene, such as Latinos and West Indians, female performers were sometimes subject to harassment or ridicule, but generally they were respected, protected, and promoted.

Even as Herc’s prominence was waning with the ascension of new DJs and MCs, new styles and forms, he continued to enjoy success as a dominant force
on the scene. Thoughout the mid to late seventies, while new doors were opening for hip hop’s next generation, Herc was still regularly rocking parties with the Herculords and Herculoids. Indeed, even as some of hip hop’s first recording stars were emerging, Herc was still earning more money by throwing parties than a gold-record-holding MC. There was little incentive, then, for Herc to get into the record business. Moreover, before hip hop recordings had proven successful as a commodity in themselves, it made little sense to someone like Herc or Flash to take the aesthetic leap of making a record out of other records. For originators such as Herc, hip hop was not something you could put on a record; hip hop was a party in the park, a social event, a practice rather than a product. Few thought the experience could translate to recordings at all, never mind into a commercially lucrative form. Thus, not only did upstarts such as Flash and Bambaataa present figurative and literal battles for Herc—who won a number of such battles before finally being outshined—but the advent of rap recordings sounded a death knell for the hip hop DJ more generally. Most early rap recordings did away with the DJ entirely, employing instead—as was traditionally the case in studios—a house band to replicate the breakbeat-derived accompaniments for MCs’ routines. The recession of the very role of the DJ spelled serious trouble for Herc, and as hip hop moved further into the club scene, with some DJs booking themselves at multiple venues in a single evening, the days of the self-sufficient hip hop sound system seemed numbered.

The year 1977 stands as a watershed both for hip hop and for Herc. For one, it was the year of the great summer blackout in New York. By many accounts, the looting of stores specializing in electronics and audio equipment resulted in yet another explosion of competing crews, each with their own state-of-the-art systems. It was also the year that Herc was stabbed while coming to the aid of a friend at one of his own parties at the Sparkle. Sustaining several wounds to his side and his palm, Herc was hospitalized for weeks and admits to withdrawing from the scene for some time thereafter. He returned still serious about his business and about maintaining the vibe he had cultivated for so long, but by the early eighties things were changing in the world of hip hop. With a few rap hits on the charts and a humming media buzz around break dancing and graffiti, mainstream arrival—in both economic and cultural terms—seemed like a real possibility for hip hop, and the music and film industries displayed no little interest in exploiting the scene’s vibrancy for commercial gain. Although he continued to sharpen his skills, collect the hottest breaks, and bring new talent into his crew, Herc never got involved with commercial recording. It is unclear, at any rate, whether he had the desire or the ability to do so: For Herc, hip hop was always about making a party move, not about showboating or vocalizing with a band of studio musicians. He was getting older, as was his audience, and the movement that he had helped to shape and form was now growing at a startling rate and going in unexpected directions.
HERC’S DECLINE AND FALL, CLIMB AND RETURN

In something of a symbolic turn, Kool Herc appeared as himself, complete with cowboy hat, tasseled jacket, and round, dark sunglasses, in the film *Beat Street* (1984)—the second attempt to market a movie about hip hop to mainstream America. Arriving in theaters shortly after *Breakin’* (1984), *Beat Street* was set in New York and clearly drew on the documentary-style realism of *Wild Style* (1982) and *Style Wars* (1983) even as it indulged in Hollywood cliches (see sidebar: *Wild Style*). Tellingly, Herc does not play an active DJ in

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**Wild Style**

*Shamika Ann Mitchell*

Released in 1982, *Wild Style* is considered a cult classic, and is credited with giving hip hop larger exposure and introducing it to a new audience. Although the film centers on the lives of fictional characters, one particular draw to the film is its cast. Part documentary, part screenplay, the film’s cast list reads as a Who’s Who of old-school hip hop, and showcases notable pioneer hip hop figures who have achieved icon status. Legendary DJs Grandwizard Theodore and Grandmaster Flash make appearances, as do the famed rappers Busy Bee and Grandmaster Caz, the pioneering rap groups the Cold Crush Brothers, Fantastic Freaks, Double Trouble, and the breakdancing b-boy troupe the Rock Steady Crew. In addition to these key figures, the film stars as its protagonists the legendary subway graffiti artist “Lee” George Quinones and Sandra “Lady Pink” Fabara, the queen of the New York City graffiti scene (she was the only known female graffiti artist at that time). Graffiti masters Dondi, Zephyr, and Daze were also represented in the movie. An important highlight is rapper Fab 5 Freddy, who in conjunction with producer-writer-director Charlie Ahearn not only helped to create *Wild Style* but also plays the hip hop impresario Phade. The film has a documentary character in that the narrative follows these outlaw graffiti artists through New York City’s train yards. To Ahearn’s credit, he was able to film in the actual train yards after receiving permission from the New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA); this is a significant accomplishment, especially for an independent filmmaker.

*Wild Style* is the precursor of later hip hop films *Krush Groove* (1985) and *Breakin’* (1984). While both of these films achieved greater commercial success, the authenticity and integrity of the hip hop cultural depictions were both questioned and criticized. As commercial films, *Krush Groove* (Warner Bros.) and *Breakin’* (MGM) introduced hip hop culture to an even broader audience and were being shown in major movie theatres across the nation. However, *Wild Style’s* uniqueness comes from its grassroots status and the raw talent and energy of the featured artists, who, with the exception of a few, perform as themselves in the cast lineup. *Wild Style’s* soundtrack is still considered a classic as well.
the film so much as a broker of sorts, a manager of his own club, which is
given a reggae-tinged title, the Burning Spear, and dressed up tiki-room style
with graffiti-inspired placards interspersed among the South Pacific kitsch.
Herc stands as a towering figure in the film, and he invests the role with
proper authority. Upon being told that the aspiring DJ (and lead actor) de-
serves a shot at playing at the Burning Spear since he’s “the best DJ in the
Bronx”—an irony that would not have been lost on the man who previously
claimed that title—Herc replies, curtly and pointedly, “Better be.” Indeed, if
no longer the “best DJ in the Bronx,” Herc is portrayed in the film as a major
tastemaker, and his name carries enough weight that when dropped to the
manager of the Roxy, for whom the lead actor would also like to audition, it’s
enough to convince him to go see the young DJ play at the Burning Spear.
Even so, it’s clear that Herc’s function in the film is to pass the torch to a new
generation, endorsing the young, up-and-coming DJ rather than reigning as
king of the scene. Perhaps his marginalization in the film’s portrayal, despite
Herc allegedly requesting—and receiving—a more prominent role, was ap-
propriate: 1984 was the same year that the Stardust Ballroom played host to
what many considered Herc’s last jam. Hip hop had set sail, and Kool Herc,
formerly the ship’s captain, had missed the boat (see sidebar: Hip hop goes
Hollywood).

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**Hip Hop Goes Hollywood**

*Wayne Marshall*

Early representations of hip hop on film have proven seminal in shaping
popular perceptions of what hip hop is all about. The first films featuring
hip hop artists and practices not only exposed new audiences to graffiti, break
dancing, DJing, and MCing, they also crystallized the very idea that these
forms were linked together and comprised a cultural whole. Starring actual
essentially served as documentaries and how-to manuals, providing an inti-
mate look at the role hip hop, especially graffiti, played in the lives of young
people in New York. These two films informed a spate of Hollywood produc-
tions that followed, most of which tended to cast actors in starring roles
despite also featuring some b-boys and b-girls and a number of early rap stars.

Set in LA, *Breakin’* (1984) was Hollywood’s first attempt to cash in on hip
hop’s sudden cultural cachet. Inspired by *Breakin’ and Enterin’* (1983), a
German-produced documentary on hip hop in Los Angeles, *Breakin’* offers a
look at LA’s vibrant and distinctive scene, especially with its focus on such
regional dance styles as popping, ably demonstrated by Adolfo “Shabba-
Doo” Quinones and Michael “Boogaloo Shrimp” Chambers. The plot revolves
around the conflicts between the worlds of artistic dance and the new breed
of competitive street dancers. Followed months later by a much derided
Herc’s story takes a dark detour in the mid to late eighties. He began selling and smoking crack cocaine, developed an addiction to the powerful drug, and found himself living in a building known as the Hallways of Horror. In 1987, he was arrested for selling to an undercover agent and spent some time in jail. “My father had died, my music was declining and things were changing,” Herc recounts, “I couldn’t cope, so I started medicating. I thought I could handle it, but it was bigger than I was” (Gonzales 150). Some of the same rap recordings that would document a bleak, crack-ravaged New York—such as Boogie Down Productions’ Criminal Minded (1987)—would also represent hip hop’s strongest embrace of reggae style to date. A lot had changed since the early seventies, including the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Jamaicans in New York, among them the notorious drug-running posses whose cool-and-deadly pose would provide new images of and ideas about Jamaicanness. By the late eighties, it seemed quite possible, if not persuasive, to represent the Bronx in a patois tongue. Ironically, Herc embraced crack right alongside his hip hop brethren but missed out on the open celebration of the very heritage he had decided to downplay years before.

Opening with stark images of urban blight, Beat Street (1984) places its narrative more squarely in classic hip hop territory: New York City, especially the Bronx, complete with burned-out buildings and graffiti-covered trains. Despite some stylization, including “graffiti” painted by set designers, the film represents the era’s style fairly well. The characters are dressed in the day’s staples: Kangols, bomber jackets, track suits, Puma sneakers. When an aspiring DJ lands a gig at a fictional club run by Kool Herc, he meets an uptown choreographer, and a class-conflicted courtship ensues. For all its strengths, including some riveting b-boy battles between the Rock Steady Crew and the New York City Breakers, Beat Street suffers from faults similar to Breakin’, presenting a slightly cartoonish, canned picture of hip hop that condescends as it celebrates and affirms stereotypes even as it critiques prejudice and inequality.

Representing a cultural and commercial transition for hip hop, Krush Groove (1985) shifted focus from underground parties and public spaces to stars and studios, and its drama revolves around economic exploitation more than class prejudice. The film was a promotional vehicle for Def Jam Records: it featured performances by the label’s star roster of Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow, LL Cool J, the Fat Boys, and the Beastie Boys. With its myth-making and savvy self-promotion, Krush Groove may, in some sense, best represent the hip hop film, proving the potential of the music-video-meets-biopic—a popular format for such films ever since, from Streets Is Watching (1998) to 8 Mile (2004).
Eventually, Herc pulled himself out of his slump and began seeking the statesman status he deserved. He literally cleaned himself up, appearing clean-shaven with short hair (but still those dark glasses), and gradually began growing some small dreads. As the wider world came to recognize hip hop as a vibrant, brilliant, poignant set of cultural forms, Herc once again found himself credited as a founding father—though, in the early days of such recognition, such praise was more commonly lavished from Europe or Japan than in the United States. Herc’s status climbed steadily over the course of the nineties, and he found himself the subject of numerous interviews, a prominent guest at conferences, and, in something of a twist, a coveted collaborator on some commercial recordings. Billed as the Master of Ceremonies, Herc appeared on several cuts, including the intro and outro (called “Herc’s Message”), on Super Bad (1994), an album by Public Enemy’s Terminator X. Significantly, the liner notes refer to Herc as “The Godfather and Founder of Hip Hop,” signaling a grander acknowledgment of the role Herc played. A few years later, the hip hop–influenced “big beat” duo, the Chemical Brothers, invited Herc to open one of their concerts in London. Herc’s voice, seemingly sampled from his live set, figures prominently on a track called “Elektrobank” from the group’s massively popular second album, Dig Your Own Hole (1997). And although Herc’s role on the track is to introduce the Chemical Brothers in classic MC style, the recording surely served to introduce Herc to a new generation of listeners around the globe.

Herc may still be better known abroad, but his stateside profile has been rising with the spate of hip hop retrospectives now regularly appearing on television, radio, and in book form. With his hair grown to shoulder length and his physique as Herculean as ever, he still casts a long shadow. Occasionally wearing a Jamaican-style tam to contain his dreads, Herc’s intermittent slippage into a West Indian lilt seems a lot less out of place than it once might have. Like his old-school comrades, Flash and Bambaataa, Kool Herc occasionally plays shows as a DJ, appearing as a guest of honor at various events and concerts in major cities around the United States and the world. In 1999, for instance, Herc performed at a CMJ (College Music Journal) convention party at CBGB’s in New York, apparently playing—among other selections—a fair amount of classic eighties house records, showing that he’s still got open ears, unconventional tastes, and deep crates. Despite being so sought after, however, Herc has continued to live humbly since his fall from the top of the Bronx party scene. Upon hearing in 2004 that Herc was working at Federal Express to earn a living, the Roots’ Ahmir “uestlove” Thompson proposed a foundation, established by successful hip hop artists, to offer substantial awards to hip hop’s undercompensated pioneers.

If proper credit (especially in monetary terms) has been a long time coming, Herc is at least now widely recognized as the trailblazer he is, and he has increasingly found himself serving as a spokesman for the old school and for hip hop more generally. Among other public acknowledgments, Herc was the
first to be recognized at VH1’s “Hip Hop Honors” ceremony in 2004. He wrote the introduction to Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2005) and appeared at several tour stops to talk about the book, his past, and hip hop’s present. He appeared on NPR’s *Fresh Air* in the spring of 2005, discussing his role as “father of the breakbeat” with Terry Gross, and he had a cameo in the video for Jin’s “Top 5 (Dead or Alive)” (2005), a song that pays homage to hip hop’s greats and begins with the line: “It started out with the legendary Kool Herc.” Back in Jamaica, Herc has also been acclaimed for his accomplishments, serving as yet another proud symbol of the small island’s big influence. In addition, at a time when, due to its cultural prominence, hip hop–related gear can generate as much revenue as record sales, Herc has endorsed and promoted since 2005, alongside fellow pioneers Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Caz, Melle Mel, Busy Bee, and Sha-Rock, an old-school-oriented clothing line, Sedgwick and Cedar, named after the intersection where he threw many of his most storied parties. In early 2006, Herc was among the hip hop luminaries donating records, turntables, and other objects of significance to an exhibit to be housed at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

The consensus around Kool Herc’s position as hip hop’s most eminent architect is, ultimately, perhaps the greatest tribute he could hope to receive for so strongly shaping one of the most powerful and popular cultural movements of the modern era. Clive Campbell’s life story provides a parable parallel to hip hop’s own. His name lives on—and not just in song. The historical record will remember Herc not only as hip hop’s founding father but as one of its shining sons.

See also: Grandmaster Flash, Eric B. & Rakim, Native Tongues

WORKS CITED


FURTHER RESOURCES


It is rare to come across a true hip hop fan who is not familiar with the name Grandmaster Flash. One member of hip hop’s holy trinity (along with DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa), Flash helped create the phenomenon that came to be known as hip hop. These pioneers’ efforts ignited the cultural dynamite that hip hop has become, blasting into all aspects of corporate, artistic, and even philosophical life. Break dancers had their boomboxes and flattened cardboard, graffiti artists had their backpacks full of Krylon
spray paint, and MCs, or rappers, provided the verbal pyrotechnics. But hip hop’s roots lie in the realm of the DJ and his turntables. Born Joseph Saddler, Grandmaster Flash was a whiz with electronics, and since he could not afford higher quality equipment, he built his first sound system himself, finding more basic elements and tweaking them to improve performance. Because he knew electronics so well, he was able to modify his wheels of steel and dazzle listeners with breakthrough techniques, manipulating the records in original ways. Some argue that his apprentice, Theodore Livingston (Grandwizard Theodore) invented the scratch, but without Joseph’s scientific approach to turntablism (another term for DJing), including prescratching techniques like cutting and backspinning, Theodore would not have made the chirping noises that became scratching. In this sense, Flash is the father of the scratch, which has become a movement of its own in the DJ world. Flash was also the first DJ to introduce acrobatics during his set, manipulating the records from behind his back, using his feet or his mouth on the mixer, and performing other outlandish physical feats that are known today as body tricks. These fancy, flashy movements enriched the audience’s experience and may have influenced the development of the break dancer. After more than thirty years, the Grandmaster continues to influence the world of hip hop in many ways, from educating striving young musicians to insisting that hip hop should incorporate all musical genres and radiate love. His technical savvy and modifications, his larger-than-life personality on stage, and his desire to push hip hop to (and beyond) its limits—all these aspects of his style and career make Flash an indispensable icon of the genre. Without his myriad contributions to the movement, especially to turntablism itself, hip hop would not be the international cultural phenomenon that it is today.

HERE’S A LITTLE STORY THAT MUST BE TOLD: JOSEPH SADDLER’S FIRST LOVE

Joseph Saddler was born on January 1, 1958, in Barbados. He was the fourth child of five, and the only boy. When he was still a baby, his family relocated to the Bronx in New York City. Because he was so young, he did not enter America with the telltale signs of his Caribbean roots, so he did not have to practice speaking without an accent, modify his dress, or undergo any of the other changes that Clive “DJ Kool Herc” Campbell had to in order to fit in with his peers. No one could sense Joseph’s hick roots, so he escaped the ridicule Clive Campbell faced as a young man in the Bronx.

Joseph may have avoided trouble from his prejudiced schoolmates, but home was an entirely different matter. While generally well behaved, Joseph had an insatiable curiosity that often left him with a sore backside. But if he had not continued his mischief as soon as the bruises healed, the man we know as Grandmaster Flash might not exist.
Whenever his father left for work, he always warned Joseph that he had better stay away from a particular closet in the Saddler home or he would have trouble sitting for a few days (Miller 72). This seems like saying, “Whatever you do, don’t touch that big red button over there!” When humans are faced with these situations, we always seem to desire to do the one thing we are not supposed to do. This is what happened in Joseph Saddler’s case. Curiosity, combined with the willingness to have his hide tanned, compelled Joseph to plunder the secret contents of the closet. He would retrieve a chair from the kitchen so he could reach the doorknob (which speaks to his age at the time) and open the creaky door to discover piles of neatly arranged, categorized records, pristine in their original sleeves. Ebullient, Joseph would choose from a variety of artists, such as Frank Sinatra, Aretha Franklin, Led Zeppelin, Glen Miller, James Brown, and Thin Lizzy. He would slide records from various genres onto his father’s phonograph and, amid his mother’s reminders of what would happen if his father caught him, dance all over the living room, lost in the loose rhythms, pulsating beats, and provocative vocals.

Joseph intended to put away all the records before his father returned from work, but he rarely put them back in the same order, so he received his promised beating. One day Joseph dropped several 78s, which shattered into many irreparable pieces. His father’s blows had extra zeal that night. Yet Joseph continued to raid the collection, in love with the vinyl circles and the magic he felt when the needle of the phonograph slid along their grooves. The impetus for sneaking into that closet—curiosity—also drove the other half of Joseph’s first love. His father’s fancy stereo captivated him, and what most fascinated him was the small red light in the bottom center of the system that glowed when the stereo had power. This tiny light triggered Joseph’s love of and intense interest in electronics—without which he would never have made the technological innovations he produced once everyone knew him as Flash. When he was a little older, Joseph often sneaked into his sister’s room, disassembling her hair dryer and any other small appliances he could find, trying to figure out which parts served what function, and then attempting to put them back together. Sometimes he was not successful. When he failed to return the appliances to their original condition, his sister complained to their parents that he had rummaged through her things because certain electronics mysteriously quit working.

Rather than punish him for secretly dissecting the small appliances, his parents realized his budding passion could become a solid source of income, so they enrolled him in Samuel Gompers Vocational High School where he could discover how appliances work without forcing his sister to walk around with wet hair. He soon progressed to bigger, more complex equipment, though he was wise enough to search junkyards around the Bronx for appliances that were already inoperative so he would not risk breaking the family’s stove or refrigerator. Joseph had latched onto a practical interest in electronics that he would build into a career, but no one in the Saddler family could have possibly predicted just how he would decide to put his knowledge of electronics to use.
GOOD TIMES: THE BLOCK PARTY, DJ KOOL HERC, AND SADDLER’S FIRST SHOW

When Joseph was fifteen, he began attending block parties in the neighborhood. At the time, DJ Kool Herc was the only one using the turntable as an instrument. Herc played the turntables by cutting, mixing, and looping sections from different records in front of a live audience. There were DJs in discotheques all over New York, but they typically played popular music and did so without rearranging or altering the songs at all. Kool Herc was different—he would look for obscure records of all genres in search of a song or part of a song that was funky enough to make the crowd get down. Later, he, Flash, and Bambaataaa all made separate and regular trips to Downstairs Records on Forty-third Street to go through the process that became known as digging (George 2004, 107). Of course, they each went to other stores as well, but they still sought the same unusual music. In the record stores they would flip through crates of records, sometimes for hours, to find any album, in any genre, that might contain something worth using in a routine, even if it were a short break in one song. But Herc was the only artist playing unfamiliar tracks for the crowds in the early seventies—so he may be more of a godfather of hip hop than a father. He was the only one doing hip hop; the other members of the trinity were only just beginning to understand the art and form their own identities as DJs.

The block party of the 1970s was a phenomenon in itself. It was free to everyone, and children as well as seniors attended with equal enthusiasm. The DJ would bring his sound system and beg someone with a first-floor apartment to let him use it as a power source. If the tenant refused, the DJ and his crew would break a lamppost and have unlimited electricity—courtesy of the City of New York. The party would last at least six hours, and although today’s police officers are suspicious of large outdoor parties, the officers at the time loved the gatherings because everyone was in the same place. The entire community was involved. A local grocery store would provide free concessions. Big-time drug dealers would bring hot dogs and fruit juice. The stickup kids, who liked to prove their masculinity by stealing anything and fighting everyone, would take the day off. Instead of settling disputes with physical violence, young men (and a few women) would form crews and use dancing to battle over territory, over the claim to superiority, or sometimes just to fool around or let off steam. The small house shows and neighborhood block parties provided a safe place to hang out for teens and twenty-somethings, a place where they could let down their guards, drop the aggressive facial expressions, and chill as they jammed to the beats. At the block parties they had nothing to prove in terms of the gang violence that climaxed right before these parties became popular. Everyone was there to enjoy the music, the dancers, the MCs, and if anyone brought beef, they were expected to settle it through a hip hop battle. Occasionally, breaking crews would get...
carried away during a battle and it would turn into a brawl, but for the most part, would-be gangsters expressed their masculinity and frustration through hip hop performance. The block party was, in some sense, revolutionary in taming a volatile youth culture while simultaneously providing free entertainment to people who could likely not afford to pay for it.

In 2004, hip hop comedian Dave Chappelle threw a block party in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. He invited many hip hop musicians, including Lauryn Hill and the Fugees, Kanye West, the Roots, Erykah Badu, Common, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and others. Chappelle recorded the experience as a documentary, *Dave Chappelle’s Block Party*, which was released in theaters in March 2006. The film was a great success, but neither the film nor the party itself can compare to the unofficial regularity and spontaneity of the seventies block parties. Chappelle’s party was meticulously planned with a schedule of events, and the songs to be performed were chosen well in advance. Block parties in the 1970s were loosely organized. Of course, DJs often had a planned order of records they used in a set, but one day they might play the first third of the set, and the last half on another. Otherwise, the events were unpredictable and improvised, like the jazz that captured the hearts of the previous generation, and the mellow nature of the scene was one of the characteristics that made the block party popular.

Joseph Saddler was infatuated with Kool Herc’s performances at these block parties. He used to scrutinize Herc’s methods, noticing aspects he wanted to imitate as well as potential flaws that could be improved to make the show even more effective at pleasing the crowd. After watching several of Herc’s parties, Joseph went scavenging to find parts to assemble to create his own sound system. With his background in electronics, he was able to use more affordable components and modify them to do things that some store-bought equipment was not even designed to do at the time. In some ways, his vocational training enabled him to put together a sound system that surpassed the others. In terms of speaker power, though, no one had a system that could match the chest-shaking power of Herc’s, but with regard to versatility and innovation, Saddler had them all beat. When he finally obtained and revamped the necessities, Saddler began practicing in his bedroom for hours each day. He was developing his own style, theories, and technical innovations, which would all prove to be fundamental to the formation of today’s hip hop. He spent over three years perfecting techniques that opened the door to drastically new approaches to DJing.

Before Flash could wow the crowd with his manipulation of records, he had to have a mixer and a set of turntables. He started out with a Sony MX 6 microphone mixer. He went to Radio Shack and got the necessary parts to adjust the mixer so it could handle the level of electricity coming into it from the turntable. The turntables are as essential as the mixer (see sidebar: Turntables). Flash spent several years working with various brands, trying to find the perfect table. He tried Pioneer, Fisher, and Magnavox, but none got...
In hip hop music, the turntables are often referred to as the wheels of steel or tables and are considered an instrument to be played by cutting, mixing, and scratching to create new sounds from existing recordings. In order to use turntables as an instrument, DJs must have two turntables, with direct-drive and pitch control, and a mixer with a cross-fader that allows the DJ to mute one turntable while allowing the other to play through the speakers. The use of a cross-fader allows the DJ to play one copy of a record forward while he or she spins a second copy of the same record backward to the beginning of the desired section; this creates a seamless repetition, or loop, of a sound that may play only once on the original record. The turntables must have a stylus and cartridge that set into the grooves of the vinyl records in order to scratch, and the turntable must allow the DJ to spin the record backward to isolate and repeat specific sections of a song. This technique of mixing and cutting is enhanced by the addition of scratching, in which the DJ moves the record back and forth across the needle to slow down, speed up, and distort existing sounds on the record.

The method of scratching was invented by Grandwizard Theodore and has been mastered by turntablists around the world. The scratching action performed by DJs allows breaks to be set in the music that are signaled by a rough, raspy scratching sound produced when the stylus hits the vinyl. The DJ then rubs his fingers back and forth in a scratching action while the record is spinning. The scratch will not work unless the DJ replaces the rubber mats that come standard under most turntables with what are called slip mats. These mats are generally made of felt and allow the vinyl records to spin freely instead of stopping on the rubber. One of the most popular models for hip hop DJs is the Technics SL-1200, which was very popular in the late 1970s and is still preferred by many DJs of the twenty-first century. Though today certain hip hop DJs rely on CD technology and music software such as Pro-Tools, many DJs still prefer to use turntables and mixers.

Further Resources

Denning, Jack. “Two Turntables, a Cheap Sampler and a 4 Track.” Tape Op, No. 5.
compared to the previous one. Flash also noticed how well the break in
the song, the section usually past the halfway point that consists only
of the bass or drums, hyped up the crowd. Kool Herc was the first one to
realize this, so he often played a set thick with breaks from all kinds of
songs. But what bothered Flash was the fact that the break was
usually only ten or fifteen seconds long. In an interview for ThaFormula.com,
he said, “That pissed me off!” He wanted the part of the song that
energized the audience to last longer, so he started working on a way to
make this possible.

The result was Saddler’s quick mix theory, which involved backspinning
(rewinding the record without moving the needle or making a sound) and
what he called cutting. After years of practice, Saddler found the courage
to perform at his first block party. He gathered his equipment and took it
to 63 Park Avenue on 168th Street. In an interview with Sally Howard, he
described the audience’s response to his technique: “They just stood there . . .
and I went home and cried for a week.” Though Herc had already been using
duplicate records to extend a break, Saddler was the first to make this the core
of his routine. The crowd did not understand—who would immediately
boogie down to a song that was just a small part of the song repeated over and
over? Saddler felt he had worked all those years for nothing. Luckily, audi-
ences would begin to catch on and he would soon rock each party ’til the
break of dawn. But this did not happen overnight.

Flash also invented the clock theory, which is a relatively simple concept
that made it possible to immediately set the needle down on the right track.
He would mark the record with tape or a crayon so he knew exactly what
part of the record he wanted to use. Many current DJs have adopted this
technique to streamline the mixing process, making it another breakthrough
method that still influences the art. At some point, though, Flash and others
needed a way to protect their wax from other DJs who wanted to buy the
same records. So DJs began dunking their records in bathtubs to remove the
labels. There are contradictory sources regarding which DJ was the first to
do this. In Jeff Chang’s Can’t Stop Won’t Stop, Herc is credited as the first DJ to
do this, taking advice from his father. However, in a Nelson George interview
in which Herc, Bambaataa, and Flash all participated, Flash claimed respon-
sibility for inventing this delabeling, and although some sources cite Herc as
the first one, he did not deny Flash’s response (George 2004, 48).

THE L BROTHERS: PRE–FURIOUS FIVE FLASH TEACHES AND
LEARNS

In the beginning of Flash’s career, observers noticed how quickly Saddler
flipped his style and started calling himself Flash. The title Grandmaster came
from Saddler’s love of seventies kung fu flicks. Bruce Lee, king of kung fu as
America knows it, was honored with the title Grand Master. It is not clear
whether his peers gave Flash this title or he crowned himself, but either way, the name stuck, and it came to signify a legend.

Before he worked with the Furious Five (the group he was with when he started recording albums), Flash worked with the L Brothers—“Mean” Gene Livingston, Claudio Livingston, and their little brother Theodore (later known as Grandwizard Theodore). They practiced in Gene’s room where Flash kept his equipment. Gene repeatedly told Flash not to let his little brother touch the decks. According to an interview conducted by Davey D, Flash believes Gene said this because he could not personally grasp what Flash was trying to do with the records. It was, after all, uncharted theoretical and technical territory; no one had done what Flash was doing, so it was hard for most people to understand. But Flash noticed Theo watching everything he did as he played, so when Gene left for work, Flash grabbed a milk crate for the little guy to stand on so he could reach the tables. The young boy became Flash’s first apprentice, but Flash could only teach him when Gene was away. Despite this setback, Theo picked up quickly and was one of the first people who comprehended the ideas behind what Flash sometimes calls his formula. In a future performance, Theo would finally get to unveil his talents in public, and from there a fruitful career was born.

Once they had played a few small gigs and were comfortable in front of a crowd, Flash pulled Mean Gene aside at a show. He tried to convince Gene to let his brother play the turntables because that would be something unique about them among the other fledgling groups and would bring them notoriety in the Bronx scene. Flash had persisted on this for a while, and this time, Gene reluctantly assented. Flash produced the same milk crate Theo had used to learn the secrets of Flash’s modus operandi. As soon as the crowd realized the young Theo was about to do something with the turntables, they set down their juice, stopped eating their burgers, and paid full attention. Would he just fool around and look cute up there with the big boys’ equipment? Would he break part of the system? Would he play the records like an inexperienced child plays a drum set, by hitting parts randomly and making a racket?

As soon as Theo began tearing up the records like a veteran, the crowd went crazy. Theo’s movements looked natural; he had fully embraced his mentor’s philosophy and instruction. This did not please his older brother. Theo outshined Gene that day, and Gene was unhappy in anyone’s shadow. According to Flash’s remarks in interviews, this is the scenario Gene had feared and what drove him to keep his brother away from the turntables. But Flash could not stand the idea of depriving anyone interested in turntablism from learning as much as he could teach them. Even today, Flash seeks out inquiring minds, making it a major priority to educate people about the DJ’s purpose and abilities, as well as providing an accurate history of hip hop as someone who has been in the trenches from its inception. He explained to Max Woodworth of the *Taipei Times* that the DJ is the root of the culture even though rappers have all the attention, and attempts to pass on hip hop’s
original values—physical nonviolence, open-mindedness, incorporating music from all colors and creeds, and doing it for love instead of the big record deal—to the younger generation. Flash is so determined to stay connected with youth that he has expressed his desire to open a school for kids who want to become DJs. Theo was his first student and was incredibly sharp and successful. His performance in the park, balancing on a chipped milk crate, was a catalyst for both his and Flash’s careers.

Before Theo’s surprising performance, though, the group mostly played at modest house parties and small discos. It was during this period that Flash met Pete DJ Jones, a veteran disco DJ who entertained the older crowd. Flash studied Jones’s performance and realized that he somehow mixed one record into another more seamlessly than Herc did. While Herc simply started a song by dropping the needle on a groove in the record, Jones had a precuing system that resulted in smoother transitions. Flash asked Jones several times if he could play on his system, and when Jones finally agreed, Flash discovered something amazing about Jones’s setup. He had rigged his system so he could listen through a pair of headphones and hear the other turntable, the one not playing at that moment, before the crowd did. Armed with this new technological opportunity, Flash went home and got to work.

FLASH GETS HIS RECORDS STRAIGHT: MIXERS, BREAKS, AND MISTAKES

After discovering how Pete DJ Jones could change from one turntable to the other without skipping a beat, Flash set out to build his own version of Jones’s system. Flash created what he called the peek-a-boo system. Mixers were equipped with a toggle switch. In the center position, it was off. When he clicked the switch to the left, only the left turntable was audible. When he clicked it two times to the right, he isolated the sound from the right turntable. His invention has been refined and is now called a cross-fader. The new version of his system involves a slot on the mixer. The DJ uses his fingers to slide the fader from side to side. In the standard DJ style, when the fader is on the right, the right turntable is the only one producing sound, and vice versa (the other option is hamster style, which is the opposite—when the fader slides to one side, that turntable’s sound cuts out). Being able to switch between tables by sliding a knob instead of clicking a switch is one change that made it possible for DJs to do more than basic mixing, namely scratching, with more complexity. For the turntablists who focus on scratching, the cross-fader is indispensable and usually needs replacement once a year, depending on the quality of the part, because it is basically the piece of the mixer that makes scratching possible. The more complex forms of scratching a DJ performs, the sooner the cross-fader is exhausted, because the scratch’s complexity is proportional to the number of times the DJ moves the fader.
Flash’s manual installation of the peek-a-boo system is just one of many mechanical modifications he made to the wheels of steel that expanded the opportunities available to the DJ and paved the way for the DJ’s more recent focus on manipulating records to create new sounds.

To be able to bring all his ideas together, Flash needed a turntable with the right belt drive and amount of torque. He wanted a table that would accelerate from completely stopped to full speed in at least half or a quarter of a revolution. This was crucial in tying together all his different methods to produce a premium quality performance, which included the ability to extend a ten-second break indefinitely. He finally came across a turntable that would work. It was an ugly silver table made by the Technics company, the SL-20. Ten years later Technics created the SL-1200, which became the standard turntable for serious DJs. The brand is cited in several hip hop songs, such as KRS-One’s “Real Hip-Hop,” and the model is even mentioned in tracks by Defari, Kool Keith, and others. Armed with a pair of turntables that would become the DJ standard, a mic mixer modified to work with his decks and fitted with his peek-a-boo system, and the modest speaker system he had obtained, Flash had everything he needed to play for a crowd. Still frustrated by the brevity of most breakbeats, Flash decided to use duplicate copies of the same records on his decks. With his peek-a-boo modification, he could play the smallest part of a song if he wished, then click over to the other table, which had the record cued to start at the beginning of the same tiny part, and thus continue that part of the song, repeating the process as long as the crowd was feeling it.

Flash was not the first turntablist to use duplicate records to lengthen the breakbeat. Kool Herc, the true pioneer of the art, employed what he called his merry-go-round technique. Herc would play the record on one table and then place the needle on the spot where the break began on the other record as the first break ended. The process of switching between the same two records to keep part of a record playing, first accomplished by Herc and then refined by Flash, is known as looping. Unfortunately for the real live DJ, digital technology now exists that makes it possible to loop part of a song, often called a sample, by simply pushing a button or two. Though Herc was the first to loop records, Flash added precision to the process, eventually blending separate records together so smoothly most could not recognize when one ended and the other began. He had seen Herc use his own technique in parks, but according to Jeff Chang’s account it was not as clean as Flash wanted his routine to sound. Sometimes Herc got off beat or dropped the needle a little too far before or after the break, but no one in the audience cared, if they even noticed. His music was so new and different that most people may not have even realized these were mistakes.

Occasionally, early hip hop performers would pretend to make a mistake, such as a breaking move that involved presenting the illusion that the dancer had started a move and messed up or forgot, when it was really an intentional stall or freeze for dramatic effect. Flash’s first performance in the park, before
he became Flash, was a disaster, in part because people did not understand what he was doing, and perhaps some of them thought the record was skipping. A few months later audiences realized that this was no mistake—it was a technique. To audiences accustomed to the smooth transition between records played by radio disc jockeys and dance club DJs, Flash’s scratches may have initially sounded like a mistake. Before hip hop, the sound of a needle scratching a record had been associated with clumsiness. Flash’s new techniques, however, made scratching rhythmic and musical. He played the turntables as an instrument, and made the sound of a needle scratching vinyl a key component of hip hop.

Even though Herc’s method of looping was not always clean, he still got the party kicking and the b-boys dancing. Herc often chose breaks that were heavy in bass or drums, making his superior speakers pulsate. If it was funky, he used it. Generally, breaks in traditional songs only involve the bass and drums, the rhythm section of the tune. Herc’s picks always pleased the crowd, and as the preference moved from an early James Brown style to the tighter, more rhythm-oriented funk tracks, the best breaks became increasingly heavy on the bass line. The hip hop audiences loved it, and although their approval is inescapably tied to how well the DJ flipped his wax, part of their pleasure must relate to this more rhythm-driven music.

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO? HI-FI SCIENCE: HIP HOP, DRUMS, BASS, AND TURNTABLISM

The hip hop generation might be the first to connect more strongly with rhythm and bass than rhythm and blues. Hip hop fans love nothing more than a trunk-rattling bass line pumping from customized car stereos. Since Herc’s use of breakbeats drove the crowd mad, listeners have gradually developed an auditory palate that prefers hard drums to guitar strums. This thirst for low frequencies may be the source of the techno DJ, whose work is principally appreciated for the bass lines. This might seem unrelated to hip hop, but techno DJs are close cousins, for several reasons. Of course, there is the obvious fact that both DJs use a mixer and two turntables as their instruments. Second, there are several crossover DJs who play hip hop and various offshoots of techno interchangeably (the most prominent of these is DJ Shadow). Also, there is the ragga DJ. Ragga is a form of techno that mixes the complex, frenzied, urban-meets-African-bush style of jungle music with reggae. Just as hip hop owes some credit (acknowledged or not) to the Jamaican selectors, the ragga DJ would not be here if not for those selectors. These DJs work with standard jungle beats and weave in vocals that speak to reggae roots. One example is the album Tribute to Haile Selassie by Congo Natty. Along with jungle noises like screaming monkeys and allusions to urban life (cf. Bob Marley’s “Concrete Jungle”), Congo Natty adds in vocal snippets
such as “Exodus,” “Jah—Rastafari,” and a brief inclusion of the reggae neoclassic, “Ring Da Alarm.”

The DJ’s set is composed of far more blues, funk, classic R&B, or soul than blasting brass or hair-band vocals that sound harsh, hoarse, and manic compared to the mellow, hip, funky vocals on more popular records. A well-known exception to this distaste for higher pitched instruments is a saxophone solo by Tom Scott, from the album *Honeysuckle Breeze*, which was the main melody in the 1990s hip hop classic “They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y.)” by Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth. Perhaps it is hip hop’s respect for jazz that allowed a sax solo to become immensely popular among its fans. That same saxophone solo reappeared in a recorded mix called *Sex Machine Today* by J-Rocc, a member of the Beat Junkies, which is one of the most active and talented crews of turntablists that exist today. This crew, which includes J-Rocc, Babu, Melo-D, and Rhetttmatic (along with other charter members such as Tommy Gunn, D-Styles, Shortcut, DJ What?, and others) has probably taken Flash’s prescratching methods and Grandwizard Theodore’s additional exploration of the subgenre further than any single DJ in the world. One turntablist who comes close to being that single DJ is Q-bert, a member of the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, which include Q-bert, Shortcut, Yogafrog, and at one time, Mixmaster Mike, who now DJs for the Beastie Boys. These DJs are often cited as the crew who initiated the turntablist culture. Q-bert’s scratching style is so quick and clean that it boggles the mind how it is humanly possible to move one’s fingers that fast without turning the track into mush. He is so venerated in the circle of veteran turntablists that he received a lifetime achievement award at the 1998 DMC Championships (see sidebar: DMC World Championships).

Q-bert looks for inspiration by trying to think about what kind of music aliens are playing on more advanced planets, and he (along with Mixmaster

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DMC World Championships

*H. C. Williams*

Some DJs practice the same routine for years, attempting to work their way up from the regional DMC competition to the DMC World Championships. The goal is understandable; the winner is declared the best DJ on the planet and can brag and gloat until the following year, when he or she must defend that title. In 1981, Tony Prince, a European radio DJ, began playing DJs’ mixtapes on his show—which, at some point, became the *Disco Mix Club Show*. He worked at one of the only nationally broadcast stations, and his show attracted 50 million listeners, according to the DMC Web site. He began receiving thousands of tapes from DJs seeking national exposure. Prince decided he had tapped into a fledgling musical movement and wanted to see it fly, so he left his job after twenty years and coerced his wife, Christine, into joining in his new venture, whose goal was to help DJs gain the success that was at their fingertips.
Mike) believes that scratching is a form of communication with extraterrestrials (see sidebar: Wave Twisters). For an example of Mike’s work, listen to the Beastie Boys’ 1998 album Hello Nasty, which includes the Grammy Award–winning track “Intergalactic,” as well as “Three MCs and One DJ,” the song that introduced Mike to Beastie Boys fans. This song echoes a remark made in Scratch, as Bambaataa speaks of his wish to see the art go “intergalactic,” which could be that next level or new frontier that DJs are searching for. The idea that the sounds made when a turntablist scratches can—and do—communicate with aliens is definitely not a typical American’s belief, but Q-bert is recognized in the turntablists’ royal court as being the best, bar none. It seems far-fetched, but maybe that kind of perspective is what it takes to master such chiseled, controlled, and frenetic finger work (see sidebar: Invasion of the Pickle Scratcher).

Turntablism is another word for DJ. Babu of the Beat Junkies coined the term, writing “Babu the Turntablist” on his mix CDs, and the concept took over this niche in the DJ world. A turntablist is typically more concerned with doing things to the records than simply mixing albums, which is why those DJs who focus on scratching wish to be called turntablists instead of disc jockeys (a term that refers to radio show hosts who play one whole song after another) or even selectors—the Jamaican term for DJs—because the selector...
is also more concerned with playing the record, though the selector will play
with the needle, pull the record back to make a sound that resembles scratch-
ing, and do other small things to spice up the experience.

The turntablist, when working alone, will typically have one turntable
playing a beat or an instrumental track. On the other table, the turntablist
will have a record made up of samples or battle breaks (short sounds recorded
back-to-back specifically for the DJ). The most basic sample is a high-pitched
swooshing noise called a crash, and when the turntablist wants to show his

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**Wave Twisters**

*H. C. Williams*

*Wave Twisters* is a forty-five-minute visual manifestation of DJ Q-bert’s ground-
breaking 1998 album of the same title, and the first movie whose central focus
and inspiration is scratching itself. Released in 2001, *Wave Twisters* uses multi-
ple forms of animation, set to match the sampling and scratching on the CD,
to produce a sensory supernova. Comparable to the Beatles’ 1968 animated
film *The Yellow Submarine* in its hallucinogenic simulation and George Lucas’s
*Star Wars* movies in its sci-fi/ extraterrestrial milieu, *Wave Twisters* begins in
“inner space”—inside the diamond of a turntable needle. The protagonist, Inner Space Dental Commander, is accompanied by the old-school character
Grandpa, the streetwise Honey, and the R2D2-meets-Duracell Rubbish. The
evil Lord Ook and his sinister sidekick, Red Worm, conspire to suppress hip
hop’s four lost arts—break dancing, graffiti, MCing and DJing. The Dental
Commander et al. are thus on a quest to save the old school, and their only
weapon is a Wave Twister—a watchlike mini-turntable that emits deadly rays
when triggered by scratching.

But do not let this linear plot description fool you; there is no traditional
dialogue whatsoever and rarely do the characters even move in ways we
consider normal. The only dialogue comes from samples that conveniently
include words, though they are often only phrases (e.g., “say ah,” “surrender
your . . . ”). Yet somehow the plot approaches linearity and the careful
observer still understands the action—despite the fragmentary, nonsensical
presentation that is expected in postmodern media.

The use of sampling, in both the animation and Q-bert’s original music, is
another postmodern characteristic of the film. The CD, like the movie, is a
collage of samples that allude to both old and new. From a fifties-era dental
hygiene commercial to pieces from new hip hop songs and electronic noises
(beeps, etc.), Q-bert does not discriminate. Allusions to pop culture—also a
postmodern quality—constantly appear. Q-bert samples video games, anime,
movies, and more. The animators parallel his allusions with an homage to the
1980s video game Donkey Kong, a parodied version of the Norton Antivirus
software called Disc Doctor, and other references to American pop culture.

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with the needle, pull the record back to make a sound that resembles scratch-
ing, and do other small things to spice up the experience.

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swooshing noise called a crash, and when the turntablist wants to show his
Invasion of the Pickle Scratcher: DJ Q-bert
H. C. Williams

In 1985, DJ Q-bert (Richard Quitevis) began manipulating records after meeting Mixmaster Mike, who later joined Q, D-Styles, Shortcut, and Yogafrog to form the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, considered the most influential turntablist crew. Q-bert approaches turntablism as if he always has more to learn, and this mentality keeps him continually perfecting his craft. Q-bert transformed the turntable into a versatile instrument, scratching recordings of violins, saxophones, and steel drums, and thereby applying a new technique to what had been chiefly manipulation of vocals, drums, bass, and guitar. Q-bert explored the uncharted territory of the turntable, taking turntablism to a different galaxy. As Q-bert explains in the documentary Scratch, he views scratching as a language he uses to communicate with more advanced life forms on distant planets.

Although underground hip hoppers can be notoriously secretive about the tricks of the trade, Q-bert has logged endless hours teaching turntablism to anyone ready to learn. He created two how-to videos: Complete Do-It-Yourself (Volume 1: Scratching, Volume 2: Skratch Sessions). He has also taught many seminars in turntablism and was a main force behind Scratchcon, the first conference for scratching, which consisted of performing and teaching young musicians with itching fingers. In an art that had become selfish and secretive, Q-bert’s desire to spread knowledge made many new DJs and showed the old ones a valuable lesson too.

Further Resources
to a new level, are not leaving behind the songs and phrases they heard themselves as the culture grew.

As an important side note, in the movie *Scratch*, the DJs cite Grandmaster DST as the “originator.” In 1984 he performed the song “Rockit” with Herbie Hancock, and the show was televised. Because many of today’s premier turntablists are concentrated on the West Coast, they were likely not exposed to the (pre)scratching DJ until they saw DST on television. This is the most logical reason why they would cite DST, rather than Theodore or Flash, as the pioneer in cutting and scratching. But they do give props to their predecessors, whether they refer to the first televised scratching DJ or to the ones who really opened the doors. One of the fundamental old-school keywords is *respect*. Hip hoppers should respect everyone, even crews they battle, even people who bite their style, even the guy who stole their cab yesterday. This is part of hip hop’s original philosophy. Flash and Bambaataa may have shaken things up a lot from Herc’s view, but all three have much love and respect for each other. These new DJs respect their roots, where they came from—when they design their own records and choose their own sounds to sample, they still pick James Brown, Chic, Earth, Wind and Fire, and other classics. They also record samples of old-school MC shout-outs and pieces of dialogue that directly relate to the origins of hip hop, including references to Islam/Black Power and Rastafarianism/Jamaica. They respect their roots, which, according to some people, go back to the Jamaican selector and his sound system.

If that is the case, then hip hop came full circle in Stephen Marley’s compilation and release of *Chant Down Babylon*, an album that layers Bob Marley’s original vocals over hip hop beats and artists who contributed their own messages to each track. The album features some of hip hop’s most popular and pure (i.e., not pop hip hop) artists, such as Rakim, Guru from Gangstar, Lauryn Hill (married to Bob’s son, Ziggy), MC Lyte, Chuck D, and others. The blend of reggae riddims and striking bass lines, the old soul rebels and the new ones, and the philosophical stance of Bob’s rude rock reggae mixed with the philosophy of today’s urban sounds, is truly a milestone in the development of hip hop itself, as well as serving as another sign that today’s hip hoppers do not want to dismiss what they have learned and inherited; they want to pass it all on to the next generation.

**FLASH AND THE FURIOUS: PSEUDO-DJ, “STEPPING LIGHTLY,” AND MISADVENTURES WITH SUGAR HILL**

Grandmaster Flash was rocking the parties and dropping the science that would later become the hip hop DJ’s central source of growth, but, as Steven Stancell (116) mentions in *Rap Whoz Who*, everyone was so focused on what he was doing to the records that no one was dancing. So he set out to find
someone to provide a vocal and contrasting aesthetic element to his performance. His first MC, Keith “Cowboy” Wiggins, had a deep, sexy voice that kept the fly girls coming to the shows, and his classic shout-outs were so engaging that Flash sought out more MCs to pump up the jam.

The next MCs to join the group were the Glover brothers: Melvin “Melle Mel” and Nathaniel “Kidd Creole.” They called themselves Grandmaster Flash and the 3 MCs. Soon after that Flash began working with a Vox drum machine and they became Grandmaster Flash and the 3 MCs with the Beat Box. The beatbox was originally a piece of electronic equipment, but the term has come to signify using one’s mouth to simulate the sounds created by that machine. Shortly before Scorpio, aka Mr. Ness, joined the group to form Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Four, a cop-turned-promoter named Ray Chandler approached Flash at St. Ann’s Park. He suggested that Flash should find a venue at which he could perform regularly, thereby maintaining a solid fan base. Flash was open to the idea, and when they came across the right club they called it the Black Door because the entrance door was painted black. After a few months of performing amid increasing problems from the stickup kids, Chandler enlisted a posse of ex–Black Spades to serve as security. They were known as the Casanova Crew and were led by a guy named Tiny.

Scorpio joined the mix of performers in leather-studded jumpsuits, but a short while after that the group split up to pursue various projects. In 1974, Bobby Robinson of the independent Enjoy Records recruited Flash and requested that he make a record with his MCs. Just before they went into the studio, Rahiem (formerly a member of the Funky Four) joined Flash after the Five defeated his crew in a battle, and they finally became Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Armed with the sense of completion derived from forming a six-member group, and their signature style of rhyming—tossing phrases back and forth to create sentences, and using more intricate and lyrically complex diction—Flash and the Five marched into the soundproof room and recorded “Superappin’” for Enjoy.

The single was not as successful as both Robinson and the group had hoped. By some accounts, it was Robinson who dropped them from the label because of the album’s poor reception; others claim that Flash and the Five left Robinson because they were dissatisfied with the amount of radio play for the record. Either way, Flash and his crew left Enjoy Records. Sylvia Robinson (no relation), a no-nonsense talent agent and co-owner of Sugar Hill Records (responsible for the first hip hop record, “Rapper’s Delight”) approached Flash one Tuesday after his regular gig at Disco Fever. She told him that she could get their music on the back of a popular record by a group called Freedom, and their first single with Sugar Hill, also called “Freedom,” saw more success than their work under Bobby Robinson. It looked like the group would finally get a turn in the spotlight. But unfortunately, the beam of light that brought them national recognition also left (most of) them in the dark.
There were signs of this upcoming blackout from the beginning. Flash’s mixing and unique treatment of the records were recorded for the album by the studio’s house band. According to Chuck Miller, Flash complimented their ability to reproduce sections of other songs and make it sound so much like his own work, but in several interviews, including with Nelson George and ThaFormula.com, he has stressed the role of the DJ as the originator and backbone of hip hop and has emphasized the fact that the DJ rarely gets the recognition he deserves.

Not only did Flash praise the house band for reproducing the music he made, but he also said that the situation was actually a good thing. He was able to stand in the control booth with a 600-pound sound engineer named Jerome. His exposure to Jerome’s work prepared him for future ventures in production. Indeed, once he was again a solo artist, he put the bulk of his energy into production, working with such hip hop legends as Russell Simmons and Chris Rock. This speaks to Flash’s ability to adapt to the flux of demands in hip hop’s development. In *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, Jeff Chang quotes Flash as recognizing hip hop’s own incessant reinvention: “It was either you survive and you go with the changes or you get left back” (128). Before hip hop’s tenth birthday, the DJ was already being marginalized, despite the fact that his name continued to appear first in flyers and ads. Because of the beatbox—which Flash himself popularized—and additional technology, the producer could imitate the DJ more easily than ever. Any studio with the proper equipment could now produce the illusion of a DJ, which is impossible for the MC, whose role became more significant as a result. The fact that Flash was on the other side of the glass from his first days at Sugar Hill should have (and might have) prepared him for the role Sylvia Robinson assigned to him—a passive, silent observer whom she kept around because his name increased record sales, and whom she expected to stay silent (this is not personal opinion; future legal battles would officially reveal her sentiment).

Flash did, however, have the opportunity to cut a record that focused solely on the DJ and what he was capable of when an MC was not rhyming over his orchestration. “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” (1981) was the first record of its kind, and it paved the way for other DJs like Jazzy Jay and Grandmaster DST to record their own DJ-centered tracks (and in fact, DST’s song was “Rockit,” the selection he performed on television that ignited a new generation’s interest in the art of the DJ). In e-mail correspondence with me, Chuck Miller discussed the details of the actual songs Flash used in the set, calling the record

a mélange of pop sounds, funk music, British rock and fragments of rare beats and tracks. The mix includes such Sugarhill tracks as Spoonie Gee and the Sequence’s “Monster Jam,” the Sugarhill Gang’s “8th Wonder,” the instrumental track from “Rapper’s Delight” (actually a clone of Chic’s “Good Times”),
and Flash and the Five’s “The Birthday Party,” along with Blondie’s “Rapture,”
Queen’s “Another One Bites the Dust,” the Incredible Bongo Band’s “Apache,” a
spoken-word section from a concept album by the Hellers, and a radio clip from a
*Flash Gordon* episode. There had been medleys before, but usually it involved an
artist singing two songs together in a four-minute span (i.e., the Lettermen’s
“Goin’ Out of My Head”/“Can’t Take My Eyes Off of You”), or they involved
knockoff medleys of 20 pop hits as sung by a single studio group (e.g., Stars on 45
or Gidea Park).

This was an invaluable chance for Flash to show listeners everywhere what
the DJ really sounds like and to prove something the whole world had been
told. As an added bonus, his eclectic choice of sounds inspired a new genera-
tion of DJs, who sampled an amazingly wide variety of songs, dialogue, and
other forms of noise.

There was, then, a catalyst for this day spent in the studio cutting and
scratching, and the resulting slices of vinyl that emerged from the wax press.
Fab 5 Freddy was all over hip hop culture. He began as a graffiti artist, then
played a pivotal role in uniting the uptown and downtown music scenes and
went on to fulfill other roles in the creation and expression of hip hop. During
the period in which he was showing New Yorkers what was going down on
the other side of town, he brought the platinum-topped Deborah Harry (lead
singer of Blondie) to one of Flash’s shows. She listened intently and watched
him work for the entire show, and as Flash was breaking down his equipment,
Fab 5 Freddy approached him to tell him that Harry was so impressed by his
skills that she might pay him tribute on an upcoming album. A few months
later, “Rapture” leaped to the number one spot and took Flash’s reputation
with it. Harry’s unforgettable lyrics, “Fab 5 Freddy told me everybody’s fly”
did more than simply give Flash a sound reason to create his “Adventures”
record. This part of Blondie’s song became a DJ favorite, and DJs everywhere
sampled pieces of it to demonstrate their loyalty to what came before them.

Although they had a loyal fan base, Flash and the Five were not taken
seriously because they still did not take their songs seriously, choosing shal-
low ideas over and over as subject matter. Sylvia Robinson decided to change
that, and the result was “The Message,” released in 1982. As the first hip hop
song to move beyond boasting about good times and including lighthearted
shout-outs, this was the song that made the critics and editors begin paying
attention to hip hop. And, as the title suggests, the song had a message. In a
1996 issue of *Goldmine*, Chuck Miller hinted at the poignancy of the song,
noting that its “lyrics told of a New York that wasn’t all parties, cars and
women—a dark commentary reminiscent of the soliloquies of Gil Scott-
Heron and Bob Dylan” (74). The track served as dynamite that razed a
mountain of chest-puffing to build a highway for hip hop as a vehicle for
sociopolitical commentary (e.g., Run-DMC, Public Enemy, Common). The
song also led to VH1’s recent recognition of Flash and the Five for the
direction in which they steered the movement. The song is still influential, as is evidenced by Mos Def’s 2004 single “Close Edge,” in which Mos incorporates part of Melle Mel’s ominous chorus, “Don’t push me ’cause I’m close to the edge,” to ground his own grim portrait of city life.

Despite its success and influence, there is a blemish on this song’s otherwise perfect complexion. Though Flash and the Furious Five were credited on the album cover, they were barely involved in making or recording the single. Most of the rhymes came from Duke Bootie (aka Ed Fletcher, the studio percussionist), and Melle Mel was the only member of the group who even made it on the track. Flash had been around long enough to worry about this: In his experiences, he had learned that once a group makes a record with only one or two of the actual musicians on it, the breakup is soon to follow. So he worked hard to get all his MCs on the track, but Sylvia Robinson complained that he was using too much studio time. Then she stopped them completely because she wanted the track to be Sugar Hill’s next single. Their next few records had similar issues with credit. Melle Mel usually got credit when he rhymed, but often the Five’s names were listed whether or not they contributed to the song. Flash soon began his search for a new label, and Sylvia took him to court over the right to the name “Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.” The judge ruled that he could keep his original title and Sylvia could continue to use the same name, minus the “Flash.”

Flash had already left Sugar Hill when they released “White Lines (Don’t Do It),” but with the song credited to Grandmaster and Melle Mel, there are people who even today wrongly believe that Flash contributed to the song. After that, the group split up, some staying with Sylvia and others moving on. Flash had signed with Elektra, and when Sugar Hill folded he asked everyone to join him on that label. The result was their reunion album, On the Strength, which was technically impressive but did not sell well, so Elektra dropped the group. A few months later, Flash learned that Cowboy, his first MC, was extremely sick, and a couple days later, two weeks shy of his thirty-ninth birthday, Wiggins died from complications of AIDS. The funeral was virtually the last place the group was together. After continuing solo work, they came together for a tour and appeared on Duran Duran’s cover of “White Lines,” but nothing was the same without Cowboy. They never reunited to perform again.

MAD SCIENTIST: FLASH SPEAKS ON HIS LEGACY AND THE RESULTS OF HIS EXPERIMENT

Flash may be more popular today than he was at the time of “Rapper’s Delight” when he was the DJ all the record companies wanted to sign. His official Web site—www.grandmasterflash.com—lists his most recent achievements and honors. The list only goes back to 1998, so Flash may have even more on his résumé than the many accomplishments already listed (though it is hard to
imagine what else there is to accomplish). He was the DJ for Chris Rock on his HBO show; he played at the Super Bowl; he played in front of the Queen of England. He was given a key to Cincinnati; a street in New York bears his name, and there is a plaque on a wall in the Bronx at 161st Street that recognizes his induction into the Bronx Walk of Fame. He and the Furious Five were recently nominated for induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (making them the first rap group to achieve this status), but when Max Woodworth interviewed him, Flash said the plaque was a greater accomplishment than the nomination. Even after worldwide recognition, he still feels most honored when it comes from his own neighborhood, and this perspective holds true for the majority of artists who grew up in various versions of the ghetto. For them (at least the nonpop hip hop artists), respect and support from the community, and the satisfaction that comes from performing and feeling like it meant something to someone, are chief sources of motivation and inspiration. This is the way of the old school, which Flash fully supports. The new school, on the other hand, while still positive in some ways, disappoints or frustrates Flash for several reasons. When asked by Davey D, Sally Howard, and others about his views on today’s hip hop, Flash responded with virtually the same answer: He does not like where hip hop has gone and is going, and he blames the record industry and commercialization for pushing it in that direction. In the interview with Davey D, which took place within days of Tupac Shakur’s death, Flash explained his ideology the following way: He, Bambaataa, and Herc all planted the seed of hip hop, and it grew into a huge tree with many branches and leaves, or possible subject matter. For Flash, anything is hip hop if it has a beat with someone rhyning over it, and where the artist is from or what the song is about has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not it is hip hop. He thinks that there is too much focus on one side of the tree (the violent, reactionary, poppin’ gats side) and not enough diversity to do justice to the whole concept of hip hop as a manifestation of diversity. Flash blames the music industry for this situation because, to him, companies do not seek out originality. They seek out a different version of the chart-topping artist at the other company.

Flash also points a finger at the music industry for being responsible for the violence that seems more prevalent, or more noticeable, in hip hop music. In his conversation with Davey D, he explains that hip hop is aggressive by nature. The goal is to get the crowd hyped up, and excitement can lead to violence in any scenario. But according to Flash, the record companies encourage East versus West and other squabbles because their artists act like guests on the Jerry Springer Show dissing each other. Flash explains that artists simply need to step back and evaluate what it is they are doing and why. In this interview, Flash is polite, but critical when he discusses the record industry. In another interview, that restraint is absent. He is direct and concise: “Corporate America has damn near forgotten the DJ” (ThaFormula.com). Because of new technology that makes it possible to reproduce the DJ’s contributions, the live DJ has become obsolete in many contexts.
This issue is probably a major influence on the development of new movements in turntablism, which make the DJ’s performance so complex that too much would be happening if someone rapped over it.

Flash is not completely negative about what hip hop has become. He recognizes that there are still artists trying to push the limits and approach the whole scene in a more productive way, and he is excited that it has grown into an international phenomenon. He has said several times that he feels lucky to be still alive so he can witness hip hop’s explosion. At times Flash’s passion can seem melodramatic, as with the interview with Max Woodworth when he mentions his desire to “instill [hip hop’s] history” into the minds of the younger generation. In the same interview, he makes an even more grandiose declaration, expressing the belief that he is “a prophet of hip hop.” Flash was one of hip hop’s progenitors and has seen the culture grow and transform; he has seen the musical genre remain true to its roots and branch off into new territory. Though Flash did not predict the multifaceted nature that hip hop music would take on, he does know its truth and continues to spread its word so that others might hear his message and find their way in the dark until the power that they will create comes on.

See also: Kool Herc, Native Tongues, Beastie Boys, Wu-Tang Clan, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg

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FURTHER RESOURCES


**SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY**

Special thanks to Chuck Miller for his help in compiling this list.

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*Grandmaster Flash*

“Girls Love the Way He Spins”/“Larry’s Dance Theme.” Elektra, 1981.
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Roxanne Shanté

Thembisa S. Mshaka

Roxanne Shanté was the sole female member of a hip hop collective known as the Juice Crew, formed by hip hop godfather Marley Marl in the borough of Queens in New York City. The Juice Crew was composed of Big Daddy Kane, Masta Ace, Kool G Rap, MC Shan, Craig G, Intelligent Hoodlum, Marley Marl, Roxanne Shanté, and Biz Markie, who beatboxed for Roxanne on stage (see sidebar: The Human Beatbox). Before each of these stars went on to successful solo careers, the Juice Crew produced “The Symphony,” one of
The Human Beatbox

Mickey Hess

Human beatbox is a term used for performers who vocally mimic the drumbeats and samples used in hip hop music. Beatbox pioneers include Doug E. Fresh (“the Original Human Beatbox”), Ready Rock C, the Fat Boys’ Darren Robinson (aka the Human Beatbox), K Love (the first female beatboxer to be recorded) and L. Each of these beatboxers created a style all his or her own. Biz’s song “Make the Music with Your Mouth, Biz” showcased the unique beatboxing/humming/singing style that Biz made famous on stage with Roxanne Shanté and the Juice Crew. Doug E. Fresh’s style was marked by rapid-fire tongue-clicking noises integrated with deeper bass sounds he made by putting the microphone to his throat. The Human Beatbox’s routine included rapid inhalation and exhalation, which created the “uh-huh-uh-huh” sound that marked many of the Fat Boy’s songs.

Ready Rock C, who performed with DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, was also known as the Human Linn Drum, taking his name from a drum machine often used in eighties and nineties hip hop production. Ready Rock is featured prominently on the group’s first two albums, Rock the House and He’s the DJ, I’m the Rapper, where he used his voice to mimic video game sound effects and the theme song from the television sitcom Sanford and Son, which he even did “underwater,” adding gurgling noises to his beatbox routine. His versatile beatbox work is best showcased on tracks like “Rock the House,” which features the Fresh Prince rhymin not over music, but over sounds created by Ready Rock C. When DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince won rap’s first Grammy for He’s the DJ, I’m the Rapper, Ready Rock C became the first beatboxer to receive such an accolade. After that album, however, he no longer performed with the group. In 1997, he sued Will Smith (the Fresh Prince) over royalties for his work, claiming he held rights as a cowriter of several of the group’s hit songs.

In the early 1990s, beatboxing became less prominent on records and became a part of old-school hip hop that was left behind in the mainstream. Certain groups, however, continue to support beatboxing as an essential part of hip hop music. In 1993, De La Soul featured Biz Markie’s beatboxing on their song “Stone Age,” which commented on the old-school techniques of turntable scratching and beatboxing that had disappeared from the popular hip hop landscape. Although beatboxing is not as central to hip hop as it once was, it remains part of the music’s history and represents an artist’s desire to keep hip hop true to its roots. In 2004, the Beastie Boys invited Doug E. Fresh onto the stage to beatbox during their performance of “Time to Get Ill” at Madison Square Garden. Current beatbox innovators include Razhel and Matisyahu, who blends hip hop styles with reggae. In the world of pop music, Justin Timberlake developed his own beatbox routine for concerts and songs.
hip hop’s first posse cuts (songs that showcase several members of a crew by allowing each MC to have his or her own verse). The Juice Crew stood together to claim that Queens was the true home of hip hop. In 1986, MC Shan released “The Bridge,” which incited KRS-One’s Bronx-based group Boogie Down Productions to release “The Bridge Is Over,” leading to a series of answer records between these two camps. Two years earlier, however, fourteen-year-old Roxanne Shanté spawned the phenomenon of the answer record. While the other members of the Juice Crew all are hip hop icons in their own right, Roxanne was catapulted to fame upon the 1984 release of “Roxanne’s Revenge,” a song that responded to U.T.F.O.’s “Roxanne, Roxanne,” the lyrics of which described an encounter with a fictional woman named Roxanne, who coldly resisted the group’s advances.

The lyrical exchange between U.T.F.O. and Roxanne Shanté eventually spawned between 30 and 100 answer records; many of these releases were from start-up labels, or self-financed, or saw only local airplay, so a definitive count is difficult. The Roxanne Wars phenomenon became so phenomenal that the song overshadowed the songmakers; Roxanne Shanté (Lolita Shanté Gooden) is often confused with the Real Roxanne (Adelaida Martinez), another female MC who recorded an answer record, claiming she was the actual woman who became the topic of U.T.F.O’s song. Shanté’s place as an icon, however, is not limited to the success of her first single. She is a pivotal MC and a pioneering female lyricist. Her uncompromising lyrics, rapid-fire delivery, and searing vocals confirmed that women rappers could be as aggressive as their male counterparts and still be commercially viable. As the “Queen of the Twelve-Inch,” she realized unprecedented sales with “Roxanne’s Revenge,” selling over a quarter million copies in New York City alone. A critical part of Shanté’s legacy is her talents as a merciless battle MC. With “Roxanne’s Revenge,” she set the standard for answer records, sometimes also called “dis records,” used to settle conflicts in songs rather than in the streets (this is where the term “bangin’ on wax” comes from).

What began as Shanté’s offer to call out U.T.F.O. on vinyl for failing to appear at a concert opened a floodgate of lyrical wars that have produced many memorable hits (see sidebar: Beef). The departure of Ice Cube from N.W.A. spawned “No Vaseline,” aimed at Eazy-E and the other remaining members of the group. LL Cool J figuratively came for the head of West Coast rhyme kingpin Ice-T with “Jack the Ripper.” In the 1990s, the beef turned bloody—and deadly—as both 2Pac and the Notorious B.I.G. lost their lives to real bullets flying amid the lyrical shots fired in songs like 2Pac’s “Toss It Up.” Hip hop’s most celebrated battle of wills and skills transpired between Nas and Jay-Z in 2001, beginning with Jay-Z’s lacerating single “The Takeover” from his album The Blueprint. Nas answered powerfully with “Ether” from his Stillmatic LP, and was proclaimed the pound-for-pound victor by the streets and the airwaves. All the rumors, rancor, and media attention that swirls around battle rhymes today tipped with “Roxanne’s Revenge” in 1984.
Upbeat party rap had met its match, and Shante made it clear that all bets were off.

As the sole female in the world-renowned Juice Crew, Shante trademarked the notion of a female MC flanked by men who assumed the roles of big brothers, protectors, and posse members. For better or for worse, this construct has indelibly shaped the introduction and longevity of female rap artists to audiences on a global scale. After the arrival of Shante, many women broke onto the rap scene with a male producer or DJ as a front man (a la Salt-N-Pepa and DJ Hurby Luv Bug or Eve and Swizz Beats’ Ruff Ryders collective), or another prominent male solo MC, as in the case of Lil’ Kim and Notorious B.I.G., Yo-Yo and Ice Cube, Foxy Brown and Nas, or the Conscious

Beef

Susan Weinstein

Beef, or conflict, is integral to hip hop culture, or at least an inevitable outcome of the intense competition that has been part of the movement from the time that DJs around the Bronx had to fight for a limited audience in order to earn both reputation and, if at all possible, a living. Add to this the long tradition of verbal humor and competition in African American genres like toasting and the dozens (aka “yo momma” jokes), and the existence in hip hop of battle, and sometimes beef, makes sense.

While Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls’ beef remains the most sensational—and ultimately, the most devastating—others caused a lot of talk in their day, such as Queensbridge’s Juice Crew’s beef with the South Bronx’s Boogie Down Productions. Around the same time, Kool Moe Dee squared off with a new young rapper named LL Cool J, claiming that LL had copied his style. Each of these beefs ended peacefully. The Juice Crew/BDP beef waned when BDP’s Scott La Rock was shot dead in an unrelated incident and KRS-One became involved in his Stop the Violence movement. LL got the last strong shot in at Kool Moe Dee with “To the Break of Dawn”; Kool Moe’s response, “Deathblow,” was considered unimpressive, and LL was considered by fans to have won the battle.

Beef continues to be part of hip hop. Indeed, 50 Cent has made beefs an integral element in his career plan. And beef can be a positive thing, if it challenges artists to hone their skills (as both Nas and Jay-Z acknowledge happened with them) and helps everyone sell more records. So far, fortunately, the cautionary tale of Tupac and Biggie seems to have kept most later conflicts from getting out of hand; that may, ultimately, be one of these two artists’ most significant contributions to hip hop.

Further Resource


Upbeat party rap had met its match, and Shanté made it clear that all bets were off.

As the sole female in the world-renowned Juice Crew, Shanté trademarked the notion of a female MC flanked by men who assumed the roles of big brothers, protectors, and posse members. For better or for worse, this construct has indelibly shaped the introduction and longevity of female rap artists to audiences on a global scale. After the arrival of Shanté, many women broke onto the rap scene with a male producer or DJ as a front man (à la Salt-N-Pepa and DJ Hurby Luv Bug or Eve and Swizz Beats’ Ruff Ryders collective), or another prominent male solo MC, as in the case of Lil’ Kim and Notorious B.I.G., Yo-Yo and Ice Cube, Foxy Brown and Nas, or the Conscious
Daughters and Paris. For women rappers, credibility and capability have been inextricably tied to their associations with men. Roxanne Shanté’s affiliation with the formidable, well-rounded Juice Crew contributed greatly to this paradigm.

Roxanne was incredibly young when her career began; she was performing and recording at thirteen. She not only “gave birth” (as she liked to boast in her rhymes) to a generation of female MCs; she also ushered in the age of the teen rap prodigy. Prior to the explosion of Shanté, black music had only seen this type of child star in R&B with Little Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson. Her only counterpart in terms of age was perhaps LL Cool J, who signed to Def Jam at fifteen. Eazy-E, in fact, tried to capitalize on the appeal of the teenage rapper by using his youthful looks and small stature to claim he was “only fifteen,” a tactic he describes in the lyrics to his debut album *Eazy-Duz-It*. Hip hop artists Another Bad Creation, Kriss Kross, Lil’ Bow Wow, and Lil Romeo are beneficiaries of the trail Shanté blazed, and the lessons she learned (the hard way) about the music business.

Although Roxanne Shanté’s time in the spotlight was brief, her influence is still felt today. She is a hip hop pioneer who developed an aggressive rhyme style that remained feminine. In an exclusive interview for *Icons of Hip Hop*, Masta Ace of the Juice Crew reflected on Shanté’s style: “She was the homegirl of the crew but she could hold her own. You didn’t wanna get into a verbal thing with her, she had jokes. She got respect from all the artists on the label. She really started it all for all of us with her record ‘Roxanne’s Revenge.’ She was real outspoken. I was just trying to look and watch and learn. She carried her everyday persona onstage with her and would speak her mind in a minute.”

**THE JUICE CREW: STRENGTH IN NUMBERS**

Along with Roxanne Shanté, Marley Marl’s Juice Crew sparked the careers of Big Daddy Kane, Kool G Rap, and Masta Ace. Marley Marl served as producer and impresario for the crew in much the same way that Dr. Dre would later do in working with the new artists he signed to Death Row and Aftermath Records, including D.O.C, Snoop Dogg, and Eminem. In 1987, Marley Marl recorded “The Symphony,” the posse cut that featured the early work of Masta Ace and Big Daddy Kane. Kane was new to the rap scene and without a single, much less an album of his own. The unproven rapper with the swagger to call himself Big Daddy was unknown when he dropped his classic verse on “The Symphony,” the song that launched his career and made him one of the most respected and popular artists on Cold Chillin’. With a crisp, deep voice and the ability to rhyme at a leisurely pace or at what sounded like lightning speed, Big Daddy Kane was among the genre’s most versatile MCs. Equal parts battle rhymer, sex symbol, and Five Percent Nation black nationalist, KANE was an acronym for King Asiatic Nobody’s Equal.
Kane’s lyrical superiority was evident on his debut album, *Long Live the Kane* (1988). The album generated the undeniable hip hop classics “Raw,” “Ain’t No Half Steppin’,” and “Set It Off.” His classic 1989 follow-up, *It’s a Big Daddy Thing*, cemented Kane as a force to be reckoned with in the genre at that time, with bass-heavy, soul-sample-based slow jams like “Smooth Operator” on the one hand, which sampled the Mary Jane Girls’ “All Night Long”; on the other end of the spectrum, Kane would rip verses packed with articulate, fully enunciated, lacerating metaphors and punchlines on records like “Warm It Up, Kane,” and “I Get the Job Done.” Both *Long Live the Kane* and *It’s a Big Daddy Thing* reached the Top 5 of Billboard’s R&B/Hip-Hop Albums chart.

Kane also had the total package going for him: In addition to being an MC who could destroy anyone on the mic in a battle, he was politically astute, taking a pro-black stand on tracks like “Word to the Mother (Land)” and “Rap Summary (Lean on Me).” Big Daddy Kane was tall, dark, and handsome with a striking physique, extremely charismatic, and blessed with considerable dance ability. He kept up with the furious pace of his dancers, Skoob and Scrap, in videos and on stage at his electrifying concerts. A regular on the biggest sold-out tours throughout the late eighties and early nineties, Kane was known to go all out during live shows, stripping down to spandex biker shorts for the ladies, even soaking in a Jacuzzi. He was a fixture during the height of the New Jack Swing era, led by super-producer Teddy Riley. This ultimately worked against him toward the sunset of his career as a recording artist, when party raps and love raps gave way to gangsta rap. Kane, once the epitome of cool, suddenly was perceived as over-the-top and corny, posing shirtless on his album cover for 1991’s *Taste of Chocolate*, wearing a silk robe on the cover of *Daddy’s Home* (1994), and appearing in Madonna’s photo book, *Sex*. Big Daddy Kane ultimately leaves a legacy of unparalleled writing ability and disciplined delivery across many styles of MCing. He was recognized at the 2005 VH1 Hip-Hop Honors.

Along with helping to spark Big Daddy Kane’s career, “The Symphony” featured one of the first recorded verses from Masta Ace. Twenty-one and fresh out of college, Ace saw a flyer about a rap contest at a skating rink, awarding studio time with Marley as first prize. Ace jumped at the chance. In an exclusive interview for *Icons of Hip Hop*, He told the story vividly: “It was at United Skates of America in Queens. The first prize was six hours of studio time with Marley Marl. For Marley, I was ‘the guy who I had to give these hours to,’ and that took a year—but he was feelin’ me enough to have me come back, and eventually I ended up on his compilation album.”

That appearance on the now classic *In Control, Vol. 1* led to Ace’s fortuitous cameo on a song that featured three other incredibly talented unknowns, Craig G, Kool G Rap, and Big Daddy Kane. Ace ended up filling in on “The Symphony” for the Juice Crew’s MC Shan. “Shan was supposed to be on there,” noted Ace, “but he felt he was playin’ himself by being on the song
with a bunch of cats with no albums out. ‘The Symphony’ crowned us the Juice Crew.” If Marley’s contest was the door that opened Masta Ace’s career, Shan’s ego blew the door off of it. Because Shan declined to drop a verse on “The Symphony,” Ace became part of the hardest crew of MCs in New York at the time, on a label packed with heavy hitters. Ace was among the second generation of Cold Chillin’ stars along with Biz Markie, Kool G Rap, Granddaddy I.U., DJ Kid Capri, and the Genius (who later changed his name to GZA and formed Wu-Tang Clan). Ace collaborated with Cold Chillin’s first lady, Roxanne Shanté, writing three songs for her *Bad Sister* album.

Before it was popular for East Coast MCs to pay homage to or integrate West Coast production, Ace did both. Signing with West Coast–based label Delicious Vinyl, he released *SlaughtaHouse* in 1995, effectively unifying the sounds of each coast on one record. He achieved commercial success with his group Masta Ace Incorporated, whose album *Sittin’ on Chrome* generated standout hits “Born to Roll” and “The I.N.C. Ride.” Ace proved himself to be a progressive MC amid many a misogynist. At the peak of gangsta rap’s woman-hating zenith, Ace went against the grain and opted to hand women the mic instead of degrading them with it by including Lashae and Paula Perry in the I.N.C. Over the course of his fifteen-year-plus career, Ace has recorded five albums and continues to tour the world performing a wide-ranging repertoire of driving, thought-provoking songs.

At the same time Ace was linking East and West Coast rap with his production style, his fellow Juice Crew member Kool G Rap was writing rhymes that would influence the hip hop subgenre that came to be known as gangsta rap. Before Los Angeles erupted with gangsta rap, before the Notorious B.I.G. dubbed himself Frank White (after the ruthless drug dealer in the cult classic film *King of New York*), there was Kool G Rap, an MC of uncompromising skill and laserlike visual descriptions. G Rap was as hard-core as any rapper had been up to the point at which he arrived on the scene in 1986.

The “Kool Genius of Rap,” born Nathaniel Wilson and based in Queens, New York, started out as the rhyming half of Kool G Rap and DJ Polo, releasing the single “I’m Fly/It’s a Demo” on Cold Chillin’ before being anointed a member of the Juice Crew as a featured artist on “The Symphony” along with Kane, Ace, and Craig G. He recorded his first three albums with DJ Polo before they parted ways in the early nineties. Kool G Rap’s rhymes were gritty tales of graphic, indiscriminate violence, told with the detail and wit of a master storyteller. He relayed the code of the streets as well as the consequences for disrespecting that code with an unmatched degree of cold intensity. His voice, curt and textured like gravel, was unmistakable due to his lisp. One might think that a speech impediment would handicap a recording artist, but this only added character and depth of feeling to his songs. Records like “Streets of New York,” “Erase Racism,” “Road to Riches,” and “Poison” were irrefutable proof that Kool G Rap meant business, and he had plenty of examples, weapons, and warnings for anyone within the sound of his voice.
G Rap was a rapper’s rapper: He spat each verse as if his life were hanging in the balance. He told the hideous truths about the game, the streets, and the music industry. He never held back, and though he only enjoyed moderate chart and commercial success, he continues to be widely regarded as the East Coast ambassador of hard-core street rap, and indeed a forefather of gangsta rap overall. Artists who modeled themselves after or deeply respected G Rap, including Fat Joe, Big L, Talib Kweli, Big Pun, and fellow Queens natives Nas and Mobb Deep, invited him to appear on a string of collaborations in the new millennium, generating momentum that unfortunately went unfulfilled for his comeback release, 2002’s *The Giancana Story*. The songs for which he is remembered best from his formidable career are “Ill Street Blues” from the classic album *Live and Let Die* with DJ Polo and “It’s a Shame,” from his only Billboard R&B/Hip-Hop chart-topping album, the solo release titled *4,5,6*.

**THE HOMEGIRL OF THE CREW**

Lolita Shanté Gooden was born November 9, 1969, and grew up in Queensbridge Projects, the largest public housing development in America. Her father was an alcoholic. She was surrounded by drugs, hustlers, and violence. She wanted to be a lawyer when she grew up, but in the meantime, she would pass the time in her courtyard performing choreographed steps and hand games in girlhood round-robins, the prepubescent ritual that, in essence, is a precursor to the rhyme circles MCs compete in known as ciphers.

Shanté was innocent, but a quick study. In an exclusive interview for *Icons of Hip Hop*, she recalled being eleven years old when she recognized she “had a knack for rhyming” in the round of her asphalt jungle: “When it came to my turn I was very creative with my rhyme,” she muses. “I started going project to project and battled for money. Hustlers would come and pick me up and ask me to battle for them.” Indeed, Shanté was making a name for herself throughout the borough of Queens as a ferocious competitor, the freestyler to beat. Thus, her career began.

While Shanté was petite in stature with a high-pitched voice, she had an attitude and persona that were larger than life, belying her thirteen years. She never wanted to be a recording artist. “I wanted to be a lawyer when I grew up,” she says. Ironically, she would wind up the victim of her own management, who took advantage of Shanté’s status as a minor throughout her five years in the spotlight. “Those five years felt like twenty-five years,” notes Shanté upon reflection. “I lost so much of my childhood, my innocence.”

According to Shanté, much of that innocence was lost to Fly Ty, the head of Cold Chillin’ Records. Shanté notes that Ty held the roles of “manager, road manager, booking agent, accountant, and father figure.” With all her business being handled by one person, Roxanne was never fully informed about how much she made for the label to which she was signed. To date, she still doesn’t
know how many records she sold. “Roxanne’s Revenge” was number one for three weeks and in the Top 10 for more than four weeks. “Some say 400,000 units, but it has to be more.” Roxanne says that she has “very few good memories of [Cold Chillin’ President Lenny Fischelberg], noting that he was “often causing a lot of separation within our crew.”

This includes the way Cold Chillin’ handled their contractual relationship with producer Marley Marl. Marley was the exclusive producer for the Cold Chillin’ label, but he too was not seeing the income he deserved. Eventually, Marley took legal action. Ace remembers it well. “Marley was getting beat [out of pay] like the rest of us. He took Cold Chillin’ to court and won the rights to the music he produced through a settlement that also allowed him to work with other artists. Once he got out of the contract, he produced LL Cool J’s multiplatinum album, Mama Said Knock You Out. His obligation is to pay the publishing. I haven’t been accounted to since 1990. That’s where he messed up with all of us.” Roxanne spent a total of eight years reclaiming her lyrics and masters as well.

Masta Ace attests to the unscrupulous practices of Fly Ty and Fischelberg. Ace wrote songs for Roxanne on her Bad Sister LP, and as her up-and-coming label mate, he observed how she and MC Shan, the label’s marquis players at the time, were treated.

Fly Ty was Shanté’s management, and he was the CEO of Cold Chillin’ so he was raping people—getting paid on both sides of the table. I was the first artist not to sign to with them for management, and Ty had an attitude with me about it. [Big Daddy] Kane got wise and went to [Russell Simmons’s] RUSH Management. Biz left too eventually and got new management (see sidebar: Biz Markie). Lenny Fischelberg was the president. Dudes were barely making ends meet, but he had a yacht, his wife had mink on at the Christmas party. They had everyone’s publishing. Eventually Lenny was beating Ty out of money too, because Ty was [known as] “Stay High Ty.” He was using drugs.

Roxanne was being issued a weekly paycheck, as was MC Shan. Ace views this tactic as the label’s way of avoiding paying her what she actually earned. It was common practice at that time to pay artists with homes, cars, and the trappings of success rather than paying them fairly and disclosing earnings with regular accounting statements. Cold Chillin’ was no different. Ace continues, “The weekly appeasement of a check was meant to pacify her. That was the way they kept her and Shan at bay. They bought Biz [Markie] a 735 BMW after ‘Just a Friend’ exploded; they bought his house, studio equipment, and a car. What they bought was most likely a fraction of what he and other artists were owed.”

Ace was witness to Shanté’s formidable mic presence. It’s what set her apart from her peers, both male and female, and part of what made her a hip hop icon. “When you talk about female MCs, you have to start with her,” Ace insisted during our interview. “There were women before her, but none that
Biz Markie
Mickey Hess

Biz Markie, also known as the Diabolical Biz Markie, the Ambassador of Hip Hop, and the Clown Prince of Hip Hop, began his career with the Juice Crew in 1985, beatboxing for Roxanne Shante at her concerts. Only fifteen at the time, Biz made a name for himself as a beatboxer, DJ, and MC. He released his first solo album, *Goin’ Off*, in 1988. Backed by the singer TJ Swan, Biz beatboxed and rhymed on songs like “Make the Music with Your Mouth, Biz” and “Nobody Beats the Biz,” which borrowed its title and chorus from a slogan for a New York City electronics store called the Wiz. “The Vapors” tells a story about the different reactions Biz and his friends got from people in his neighborhood before and after his hip hop stardom.

Still active in music, Biz has maintained his position as a hip hop icon even though he may be best known for his catchy pop hit “Just a Friend” and for the 1991 sampling lawsuit that nearly destroyed his career. Biz sampled portions of Gilbert O’sullivan’s “Alone Again (Naturally)” for his song “Alone Again,” and when O’sullivan won a subsequent lawsuit, Biz’s 1991 album *I Need a Haircut* was recalled from stores. Biz’s career survived the lawsuit and the unprecedented fine levied against him by Judge Kevin Thomas Duffy. Always the clown, Biz referenced the lawsuit in the title of his 1993 comeback album, *All Samples Cleared*.

While he has slowed in releasing albums over the past decade, Biz remains a hip hop icon who DJs in clubs and guests on the albums of other rap artists. In 2001, he toured with the inaugural Spitkickers Tour, along with Talib Kweli, De La Soul, Jurassic 5, Dilated Peoples, and Pharoah Monch. Biz has guest starred on albums by De La Soul and the Beastie Boys, and in 2005 he starred on the VH1 reality show *Celebrity Fit Club*, which puts actors and musicians in a weight loss competition. Biz, who is known for scratching turntables with his belly at concerts, lost forty pounds, more weight than any of his competitors.

Further Resource

offered to cut “Roxanne’s Revenge” for Mr. Magic, Marley Marl, and Fly Ty, who had promoted a U.T.F.O. concert that the group never showed up for. Veteran on-air personality and hip hop cultural icon Kool DJ Red Alert was the disc jockey who was the first to play “Roxanne, Roxanne” by U.T.F.O. on the radio. His choice of this song was far from accidental. Red Alert was in the mix at 98.7 KISS New York in 1985. The label serviced him with the U.T.F.O. twelve-inch single “Hangin’ Up.” Red Alert thought its B side, “Roxanne Roxanne,” sounded better: “They wanted to promote ‘Hangin’ Up,’” he recalls. “I didn’t care for the A side, so I flipped it over and played it.” He even took a little heat for it from Fred Maneo, the president of U.T.F.O.’s label, Select Records. Maneo thanked Red Alert for playing the record, but chided him for playing the wrong side. “During this time, if anything new and exciting came on during my mix, it would circulate through all the schools because the kids would tape my show and talk about it all week long.” By the time a week elapsed, the word was out all over the city about U.T.F.O.’s new song. Red Alert had his answer: he had broken a hit.

U.T.F.O. (Untouchable Force Organization) was made up of Mixmaster Ice, the Educated Rapper, Doctor Ice, and Kangol Kid. The group exploded with their track about Roxanne, the fictional girl who refused to give them the time of day. They performed throughout the New York City area on the heels of their smash hit. But when U.T.F.O. canceled on Mr. Magic, who was the disc jockey for New York’s WBLS, Roxanne took up the fight on vinyl. However, according to Red Alert, by the time Marley Marl brought a tape of “Roxanne’s Revenge” to Mr. Magic to play on the air on that fateful Sunday night, he was on a different station, WHBI 105.9. The song caused a commotion that rippled through a then very small, tight-knit rap industry. Shortly after the debut of “Roxanne’s Revenge,” Red Alert visited the offices of Russell Simmons at Def Jam Records and RUSH Management. At the time, Simmons managed reggae artist Jimmy Spicer, rapper Spyder D, and others. Spyder was at the office the day Red Alert came by. Spyder came to play a song for Russell recorded by his then-girlfriend, Sparky D. The song was “Sparky’s Turn,” an answer record tailor-made for Shanté that was released on Nia Records. A fourteen-year-old girl had ushered in a concept of lyrical rivalry that was far from friendly. Red Alert watched the rivalry develop from the stage as Sparky D’s DJ. Red Alert considers Shanté to be a cornerstone of MC battling. “Shanté was the one, no lie. Sparky was the underdog because Shanté sparked the whole thing. Before Shanté’s battle records, there was only ‘The Showdown,’ a record featuring the Furious Five versus the Sugarhill Gang. But it was a friendly record between label mates, designed to promote each group at one time.”

The lyrical contest between Roxanne and Sparky was so popular that they toured together and performed their respective battle rhymes on the same bill. Red Alert hit the road backing Sparky, who even cut him the song “He’s My DJ.” While hip hop beef has escalated to tragic outcomes in recent history,
Red Alert notes that at that time artists kept their attacks on record, and it rarely spiraled out of control because “entourages were not so big that they could rev things up between camps.” Sparky D never released her own album, but Roxanne was on a roll. Red Alert described “Roxanne’s Revenge” as an explosion that “made her presence felt.” “Queen of Rox” got people to the dance floor in clubs all over the city. By the time “Bite This” came out, “everybody was for Shanté,” recalls Red Alert. “She was making a stamp for herself.”

QUEEN OF ROX

Shanté cut five twelve-inch singles after “Roxanne’s Revenge”: “Runaway,” “Queen of Rox,” “Bite This,” “Def Fresh Crew” (with Biz Markie), and “Fly Shanté.” Shanté was a headliner in her own right, and she performed tirelessly, even while pregnant with her first child at age fourteen. She rocked the stage while visibly pregnant, sparking protests in some cities. “Mothers would be picketing me, saying I was promoting teen pregnancy,” she recalls. Though by all indications from her lyrics, Shanté was bold, brazen, and in full control, the reality of her life was the polar opposite. In her interview for this essay, she explained that she had no choice but to perform under those conditions. She had emancipated herself as a minor at age sixteen. Without parents to guide or protect her, she looked to a man to fill the void. She got involved with an older man who rendered her powerless with physical and psychological abuse. A seemingly indestructible young woman was imprisoned by the abusive, exploitative relationship she was in. It certainly impacted her view of men as untrustworthy and dangerous. This sentiment was echoed time and again in her songs like “Brothers Ain’t Shit,” which Shanté says includes her favorite rhymes.

“My boyfriend at the time was eighteen years my elder. He was the father of my child. When our son was born, I needed to present my emancipation documents to leave the hospital with my baby. My boyfriend withheld those documents and dangled them before me whenever I threatened to leave him. This went on for three years. The only way I could raise my child was by staying with him.” Shanté’s own father was an alcoholic. She would not comment on her mother’s absence, but it caused Roxanne to emancipate herself so she could provide for herself on her own. Being a child whose parents were not in her own life, she could not conceive of being an absentee mother.

In addition to her problems at home, she was also being exploited creatively. In the studio, she freestyled her rhymes for her early recordings. The lyrics to “Roxanne’s Revenge,” “Bite This,” “Runaway,” and “Queen of Rox,” for example, were never written down, yet people in the studio with her would sign their names to her work as the writers of those songs. She was told to split her concert earnings with Fly Ty and Marley Marl equally, and
did so, ignorant of the pay scale for DJs and producers when she was the top-billed artist. Shanté trusted no one. She would bring her child to the venue and keep her eyes on him throughout her set. “I would hand my son to the bodyguard, perform, leave the stage, then get my son back and go to the hotel. It was really me against the world onstage.” What audiences who watched her perform were actually witnessing was a volcano erupting.

Shanté toured the world on the strength of these hits with the Juice Crew. She headlined the Fresh Fest Tour as the only female on the bill with LL Cool J, Public Enemy, and Eric B. & Rakim. She signed with Columbia Records and released her debut album, *Roxanne*, in 1988. It contained the hits that made her a household name throughout ghettos of America. She followed with her second and last album of new material in 1989, *Bad Sister*, which she recorded with the Cold Chillin’ label. At this point in her career, she performed songs written by Big Daddy Kane, “Go on Girl” and “Have a Nice Day,” both of which were hits.

Roxanne Shanté notes her collaboration with Rick James as the highlight of her career and her proudest moment as an artist. She and James recorded “Loosey’s Rap” when she went to his home in Buffalo, New York, to meet and record with him. They recorded the song that became a number one R&B smash and a Top 10 pop hit on the first night of her stay. But she was his guest for another two weeks. James taught her about the ups and downs of the business, mentoring her on its pitfalls. She was enthralled by all the plaques, awards, and wealth he had amassed, an outcome vastly different from her experience as a recording star. “I was in awe of his house for another two days.” Their collaboration culminated in a shared bill in which Shanté and James performed at the Apollo together. Hip hop had become all the rage, giving traditional funk and R&B a run for its proverbial money on the black music scene. Roxanne recalls her first look at their names on the Apollo marquee. In her view, it serves as a metaphor for the divisive tendencies of the music industry in relation to generations of black musicians. “I saw ‘Roxanne Shanté and Rick James’ on the marquee. I was like, ‘Wow, look at that!’ My mother and manager told me to have the venue change it to put his [name] on top, out of respect for an artist who had paved the way for me. Young artists get caught up being the one with the hot record of the moment, and I wanted to show Rick James respect.”

Cold Chillin’ was a subsidiary of Warner Brothers Records. Because she was a minor when she signed, it was written into her contract that her education would be financed by the label, with no limit on the amount of tuition paid or term of subsidy. In an ocean of hopeless circumstances, this was Shanté’s blessing in disguise. She feels that this clause was a way for her handlers to assuage their guilt; she also asserts that they all underestimated her and never thought she would pursue education on a long-term basis. No one involved with Shanté’s career believed she would take early retirement at eighteen, but that is exactly what she did. “They thought I would get strung
out and end up having more babies,” she laughs. “But God had a bigger plan for me, so I socked it to them.”

Roxanne was eighteen years old with two children when she realized she was exhausted from being used by the rap industry and abused by her boyfriend. She had come to associate rhyming with being abused and mistreated. While she issues a disclaimer of “not being a religious fanatic,” what she describes about her prayer after five years of growing up too fast and hurting too much was for her a miracle. “I woke up one morning and decided I didn’t want to rap anymore; I had a distaste in my mouth for it. I was in an abusive relationship with this man and my label, the people I created with, they all let me travel the world with him, get black eyes from him. We were all supposed to get rich together, buy nice houses, and rise up out of poverty together. I realized that if I was no longer a commodity, they would let me go. I asked God to order my steps. I walked out of my house, and I ended up at the steps of Marymount University.”

Shante´ registered and took courses at Marymount. She also did undergraduate study at Cornell, but eventually returned to Marymount where she earned a doctorate in psychology, becoming Dr. Roxanne Shanté. Now thirty-three years old, she heads up a thriving psychology practice in Manhattan. Her upbringing and experience as an abused teenage mother informs her practice. The majority of her clients are women in or recovering from abusive relationships and mothers fighting to regain custody of their children. She is in the process of obtaining certification as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for the State of New York. And she has not given up on her dream of becoming an attorney.

She had a taste of the legal profession during her ordeal to secure her master recordings. Her story is an example of the arduous journey to ownership of one’s own intellectual property after years of being misled and shut out with respect to the status of one’s work.

THE LEGACY OF ROXANNE SHANTÉ

Shanté is often regarded as a gifted performer but not necessarily the author of her own material. Fellow Juice Crew MC Big Daddy Kane did in fact write for her, but not until her second album; the hit songs that put her on the map were of her own creation, arrangement, and design. They were made up in the moment while recording, just like her round-robin cheers in the Queensbridge projects had been. Shanté’s lyrics are a bold testament to how raw the creativity of hip hop was, often going from the streets or the mind right to tape, skipping a rhyme book altogether. She is an example of a “writer” whose pen was the microphone, whose paper was the reel-to-reel studio tape. Kanye West and Jay-Z count themselves among artists like Shanté who rarely write down their lyrics—not only to protect them from being misappropriated, but
as an extension of the griot style of storytelling, a tradition of musical expression rooted in the drum and born on the continent of Africa.

This method of creation presented a problem for Roxanne Shanté: Since she freestyled much of her work and was naive about the mechanics of publishing and royalties, instead of protecting her lyrics from being copied by another rapper, never writing them down served to make her vulnerable to intellectual property theft. She never signed contracts with her producers or managers, yet many of her handlers claimed writing credit on her songs beyond the scope of their actual contribution. “Other artists were listed as writers on my music because they were present in the studio,” she notes incredulously years later. She did not realize anything had been stolen from her until she began to educate herself about the industry from which she retired:

I went to every seminar and skills class so I could find out what was stolen from me. I went back to my producers and asked them to present a contract. I never signed contracts, so they could not come up with them. When I told them if they falsified contracts, I would fight them in court, they’d offer me a thousand dollars to sign my rights away. I thought to myself, “They really think I am stupid!” Once I saw that these guys were the same deceitful people they were when I was rapping, I decided to take it all. I wrote down the addresses to every house I’d been to for parties, meetings, or celebrations and if they belonged to anyone who claimed to own my music, I put a lien on those addresses. Then I waited for them to attempt to refinance or sell. To their surprise, there my name would be on the title search. Eventually, they would contact me. I would ask them what they intended to do with “our house.” One person actually said, “It’s my house, not our house!” I reminded them that they bought the property with the money they made pretending to be me. I ended up owning all my masters.

In 2005, Shanté sued Janet Jackson for using her voice without permission on her album, *Damita Jo*. Shanté discovered her voice saying the infamous words, “so fresh” from her song “Def Fresh Crew,” which also features Biz Markie. As an artist who spent most of her career having her work exploited, she is now vigilant about protecting her assets and intellectual property rights. One of the ways she does this is by leaving her name off as the owner. She has found that “being a black woman that owns her masters makes people want to find ways around paying,” so she lets those who seek the use of her music do the research to find and contact her. If they don’t, once she discovers any misuse, she addresses it. Upon recording “Like You Don’t Love Me,” neither Jackson nor anyone in her camp looked for Shanté to get permission. By the time Shanté had sent an invoice for payment, the infamous wardrobe malfunction (in which Jackson’s breast was exposed) had taken place at Super Bowl 38. “Her people said she was going through a lot, so I waited, figuring they would get around to paying me,” she recalls. Months passed. Shanté called. Then she was told by Jackson representatives that the sample was not even her voice. “That’s when I got upset,” said Shanté. “Anyone who knows
hip hop music knows that’s my voice; they may think it’s from ‘Nobody Beats the Biz,’ but it is actually from ‘Def Fresh Crew,’ which I own. It wasn’t something I preferred to do but at that point, after being insulted, I brought the suit.”

In the meantime, Shanté had gotten into the voice-over business after retiring from music, performing in animated programs and films. She had voiceprints made to authenticate her characters and prevent impersonation. She went a step further while she was getting her voiceprints made. “Something told me to have one made of me rhyming. I sent a copy to Ms. Jackson’s people. No response.” So she started to research Janet Jackson’s property holdings in search of the right to place a lien against the royalties she was owed. “Word leaked to her attorney that I investigated some of her real estate. Right before I placed the lien, the check came.” Shanté is unequivocal about her stand to protect her musical legacy. The days of others using her creativity are long over. She is the embodiment of information in action for artists who want to protect and benefit from their work. On her Myspace.com home page, she pledges her commitment to answer questions to help any artist avoid the path she traveled.

Unlike many unsung heroes and heroines of hip hop, Shanté won great acclaim while she was actively recording and touring as a skilled lyricist and dynamic performer. She did not have to wait until she was deemed a “pioneer” to receive the respect she was due. She does not count herself among the “angry old-school rappers” who gave hip hop its start. “I have been through and survived so much. I had my time, I did it very well, and no one can do it like me again. I’m in the history books for it. I take the titles and accept them all. It’s their turn now; I couldn’t be ‘the one’ forever. Am I upset at how women are representing the music today? Yes. Am I upset that they have sex shows instead of live shows? Yes I am. But I dote on the fact that I gave birth to those female MCs.” Shanté likens commercial rap music and hip hop to respective “children of the same mother; one lives a lavish life, the other is still struggling.” She calls herself an MC and draws a line of distinction between MCs and “rappers,” a line that the corporatization and mainstreaming of hip hop music via entertainment industry has necessitated. “An MC will move a crowd without a hit record. The rapper has to have the song to move the crowd; without the song the audience could care less what rappers have to say. Rappers need videos, MCs don’t,” Shanté laughs.

The far-reaching impact of Roxanne Shanté is deftly exemplified by Mystic, a female MC who paid homage to Shanté in 2006 in her guest verse for the remix of “I Love Being a B-Boy” by the Crown City Rockers. Even today, women artists must be vigilant about keeping the history of their contributions to the art form of MCing top of mind. As the sole female on a song full of male rymers, Mystic embraces the charge of representing the ladies, just as Shanté did two decades before: “I love bein’ a b-girl even now that I’m grown.” Mystic, who was discovered by dance hall artist Jamal-Ski and
toured the world with Digital Underground, has made a name for herself without being the first lady of any one crew. Though she cut her teeth on MCing and is a prolific lyricist, Mystic is acknowledged as an equally skilled vocalist as well. The Grammy-nominated artist had this to say when asked to reflect on the impact of Roxanne Shanté: “What is so amazing about her is that she was just a fly chick; she never compromised herself in her rhymes. When I heard her for the first time, it was like, wow—a female who was dope at battle rapping! There was no way you could miss her and she was just as dope as the dudes!”

Mystic echoes Roxanne’s own sentiment about the exploitation of women in rap, but from another angle: “We had so few women at that time, but their voices were so loud. It’s a shame that so much [current rap] music has men giving out directions [to women] on how to degrade themselves: ‘Shake this,’ ‘drop that.’” Mystic’s observation stings with irony: Despite their volume in the genre today, women’s voices are being drowned out by the sexually explicit, completely disrespectful content of their male counterparts. Add to the equation the hypersexualization of female artists by their handlers and record labels, and you have a sonic landscape that is imbalanced at best and insidiously dangerous at worst. As women rappers’ voices are muted by chauvinist marketing and lyrics lacking substance, the assertive, womanist ring of Shanté’s voice continues to echo with unparalleled power. This power to raise her voice in a crowd of men, to rise above the abuses and injustices handed to her by such men, is her legacy. In her short career, Roxanne Shanté left an indelible mark on hip hop, creating the mold for bold MCs of any gender, setting a standard of freestyle improvisation for all comers to meet. And today, she is a beacon for any artist who was exploited and seeks redress for publishing rights, master recordings, and monies owed retroactively. Shanté experienced the worst exploitation imaginable and emerged victorious by using the legal system to her advantage. Her perseverance in the recovery of her intellectual property is both an inspiration and an admonition to protect one’s creativity at all costs. The industry did not break Roxanne Shanté. In fact, she broke away from it and thrives today as an entrepreneur, psychologist, and hip hop activist, serving on the board of directors for the Hip-Hop Association. Shanté is truly a hip hop icon.

See also: Queen Latifah, Nas, MC Lyte, Lil’ Kim, Salt-N-Pepa

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FURTHER RESOURCES


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY


*The Best of Cold Chillin’*. Landspeed, 2005.
Run-DMC defined what a hip hop icon was and would be to future hip hoppers and rap fans. What made Run-DMC special and ultimately iconic was their ability to tell the story of the American dream through the perspectives of three young black males from Hollis, Queens, and to tell the story in such a way that the world would listen. The marketing decisions made by Run-DMC’s management team, including Bill Adler, Rick Rubin, and Russell Simmons, were key to positioning Run-DMC as an icon in their own time and into the future. Run-DMC’s management harnessed the possibilities and influence of mass media and new recording technologies to make Run-DMC an icon in the minds of millions of consumers globally. Run-DMC, as a group and management team, enacted myths of Americana within a uniquely hip hop context to model on a corporate level what would become popularly known as the hustle, and produced a double framework of authenticity and crossover appeal that would serve hip hop icons and fans long after their reign.

Celebrity making has a long history in America, but Run-DMC not only helped to redefine how a hip hop act could use new technologies and media to
create a career in music, they also helped to redefine the notion of celebrity in America. They broke barriers of who was allowed to be seen and heard on a mass scale. Important to this discussion is the story of how Run-DMC earned the respect and trust of the people from the inner city of New York that they claimed to represent, while at the same time gaining respect and trust from the music industry and advertising executives who gave their music global reach and signed their checks. How Run-DMC managed this cross-cultural appeal in business and marketing is the story of their iconic status, and helped define early in hip hop history what made a hip hop icon.

Run-DMC was one of the first to introduce the notion of a hip hop brand; the notion that a brand identity could exist separate from and beyond the bodies of the rap performers. Run-DMC ultimately became bigger than any one of its members—Run, Jam Master Jay, or DMC. The advent of music videos, which were both a new medium for music and a music marketing strategy, created new possibilities for artists in the mid-eighties. MTV debuted in 1981 and provided musicians a place to be seen as well as heard, but the lack of videos from black artists was an issue, and it was not until Run DMC’s “Rock Box” in 1984 that MTV aired a rap video. The significance of rock music to Run-DMC’s sound and subsequent commercial appeal is also significant in terms of race, class, and representation. Run-DMC’s ability to guarantee authenticity and crossover appeal by combining rap and rock is a story about different sonic and racial worlds coming together and sometimes colliding. Run-DMC successfully branded themselves across multiple commercial markets and in this way drew on American myths that spoke to people across race and culture in the United States (and globally). They earned the respect of scores of White rock fans, scores of black and brown rap fans, and scores of fans in between. Their approach to making music was a conscious and lucrative marketing strategy by Def Jam Entertainment, Run-DMC’s management, and was foundational in terms of defining and cementing Run-DMC’s iconic status (see sidebar: Def Jam: Rap Enters the Mainstream). The rap-rock merging in combination with the strategic use of media by Run-DMC, in terms of videos, touring, and print media—as well as the prioritization of rock music videos on MTV in the mid-1980s—led Run-DMC to have the first rap video on MTV with “Rock Box” in 1984, followed by the hugely successful “Walk This Way” in 1986. These factors, among others, ultimately positioned Run-DMC to define what an icon was on their own terms.

MIC CHECK

In the years leading up to Run-DMC’s debut, the world witnessed kids memorizing the scenes in Wild Style and Breakin’, and copying the dance moves and mural styles they saw in film and on TV. By 1982, hip hop had arrived in full force and was the hottest thing on the scene at hip clubs like the Roxy.
Def Jam: Rap Enters the Mainstream
Jeb Aram Middlebrook

Before the rap label Def Jam became known to the world in 1984, the two founders, Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin, had their own projects. Russell Simmons, brother of Joseph Simmons (later known as Run of Run-DMC), was juggling management and production, making beats, and throwing shows. Early on, Russell managed his brother Joseph as DJ Run; Run worked with Kurtis Blow, the first hip hop artist to record a full-length album on a major label (in 1979). Russell had a keen eye for talent, and positioned himself as an artist manager and developer with his own company, Rush Management. Rick Rubin, meanwhile, was running a small record label, Def Jam, out of his NYU dorm room von University Place in Greenwich Village. His musical aesthetic matched Russell’s: huge beats, minimal melody, and aggressive vocals. Russell saw the Def Jam imprint on the record “It’s Yours” by T. LaRock and Jazzy J, and wanted to meet the guy who’d made the beat. Russell and Rick met and their partnership as co-owners of Def Jam ensued. They both rebelled against the smooth R&B that typified black music on the radio at the time; and both embraced the rebel attitude that hip hop embodied. As Russell put it, they both saw that there was more in common between AC/DC and rappers than between rappers and Luther Vandross. By the time Russell became co-owner of Def Jam, he had already penned a record deal with Priority Records for Run and his group, Run-DMC. Their first album, *Run-DMC* (1983), would become a hip hop classic. Russell continued to manage Run-DMC from within Def Jam and helped to successfully guide their career and branding on Priority Records. Russell’s goal with Run-DMC was to sell “black teenage music” to black teenagers, as well as to mainstream America. For Russell, ghetto attitude came as second nature to many of the early MCs, but his view was that they didn’t see their theatrics in their own lives. They would polish it up for mass consumption by wearing what Rick James or a rock band would wear. Run-DMC represented a brand that saw what was happening in the street and stayed true to it. “I’ve always thought it takes a bit of a suburbanite—as we were, coming from Queens—to see the power in ghetto culture,” Russell said (Simmons 69). The third Run-DMC album, *Raising Hell* (1986) on Priority Records, following *King of Rock* (1985), proved to be the tipping point for hip hop—the tipping point that would thrust hip hop onto the world stage and give people a glimpse of what hip hop could and would be. *Raising Hell* was the album that raised the stakes of hip hop while burying the Bronx. Rhyming skills on the corner could not hold weight against MCs with publicists, tour managers, and image consultants—especially when the rap group was Run-DMC and the management was Russell Simmons and Def Jam.

Work Cited

There, British expatriate Kool Lady Blue created a sensation booking DJs, MCs, graffiti writers, and break dancers in weekly celebrations of hip hop culture. The Bronx was the place to be for hip hop. Soon a second generation of performers emerged. Soon the promise of cash and prestige brought new promoters, bookers, managers, and performers to the scene. Then the artists of Rush Management, including Kurtis Blow and Run-DMC, arrived to change the rap game forever. It was time for the Bronx to sit down, and for Queens to stand up.

Run-DMC became a pioneer in New York City rap. The group was formed by Joseph “Run” Simmons (born November 14, 1964), Darryl “DMC” McDaniels (born May 31, 1964), and DJ “Jam Master Jay” Mizell (January 21, 1965 – October 30, 2002). The trio originally performed as Orange Crush in the early eighties, and renamed themselves Run-DMC in 1982 after graduating from St. Pascal’s Catholic School. They had known each other as children in the Hollis district of Queens in New York City. Run-DMC circulated demos in the underground mixtape circuit and eventually signed to Profile Records for an advance of $2,500, immediately scoring a U.S. underground hit with “It’s Like That” (see sidebar: Mixtape Promotion). It was the single’s B side, “Sucker MCs,” however, that began to turn Run-DMC into an icon.

Mixtape Promotion
Shamika Ann Mitchell

Before and after the advent of leaking albums on Internet file-sharing sites in the late 1990s, many rappers used the mixtape industry to their advantage by releasing unofficial tracks to create interest in a forthcoming album. As the mixtape became a marketing tool in the 1980s, reputable mixtape DJs began to use their clout to attract premier rappers to perform on their mixtapes. This is advantageous to both the DJ and the rapper; while the DJ has exclusive access (which helps to guarantee sales), the rapper is able to stay true to his roots as a street artist and maintain his credibility. One mixtape form that rose to popularity in the late 1990s hails from the South. Called “slow music” or “screwed,” the songs are played at significantly slower speeds by a process originated by the late legendary DJ Screw, who hailed from Houston. Many Southern-based DJs are adding scratches and cuts to these screwed mixes, essentially chopping up the song; these songs are called “screwed and chopped.”

Because mixtapes were also used as demo tapes for rappers, they became viable outlets for new artists to get exposure. Even today, mixtapes are credited with playing a crucial role in a number of major rappers’ careers. As a promotional and marketing tactic, mixtapes not only help to generate interest in a rapper’s upcoming project (especially for one who has taken a hiatus) but also keep the artist relevant and contemporary until the next album is released. In addition, several rappers have made efforts to release mixtapes in addition to their commercial studio releases; two rappers who are
“Sucker MCs” became a popular phrase in rap slang, a term that separated the real MCs from the fake ones. It signified an important stage in hip hop, where rap parlance was elevated to the level of pop speech and quickly distinguished those who lived hip hop from those who just listened to rap. Many critics say that the single “Sucker MCs” marked the birth of modern hip hop. Its sound was bare-bones, involving no instruments aside from a drum machine and a turntable, and Run-DMC provided the iconic fashion image of the b-boy, or break dancer: street clothing, chiefly sportswear, and street language. Following the success of “Sucker MCs,” Run-DMC’s album went gold in 1984, the first time a rap album achieved that level of sales. Run-DMC’s mainstream popularity allowed them to take their act on the road, touring extensively throughout the United States and Europe. With their album sales, music videos, and concerts, Run-DMC quickly became the face of rap music in the popular imagination. In 1985, they extended their work to film, appearing in *Krush Groove*, a Def Jam vehicle that showcased performances from Run-DMC, The Beastie Boys, Kurtis Blow, and other artists signed to the label.

**IT’S TRICKY**

“It’s tricky . . .” ran the second track on Run-DMC’s best-known album, *Raising Hell* (1986). DMC said the song was about how the hip hop industry
can be complicated for a young black artist (Coleman 35). Run-DMC represented street poetry revamped, plugged in, amplified, and marketed. Jay, Joe, and Darryl were from Hollis—a working-class community for upwardly mobile blacks. These aspiring entertainers, however, acted as if the neighborhoods south of the Grand Central Parkway, west of Francis Lewis Boulevard, north of Hollis Avenue, and east of 184th Street were the South Bronx—dangerous, crime-ridden streets. The microphone, the amplifier, allowed them to live out these fantasies at high volume. DJ Run, aka Son of Kurtis Blow, lived the performer’s life as early as eighth grade. DMC, calling himself Grandmaster Get High early in his exposure to music, smoked joints and drank quarts of beer in the basement of his parents’ house while they were at work or asleep. These were DMC’s practice sessions on the turntables. The street life of Hollis was filled with private houses rather than the apartment buildings of the Bronx, and Joe and Darryl experienced supportive and financially secure family lives. The group’s third member, Jam Master Jay, was born in Brooklyn and moved to Hollis with his family when he was ten years old.

Early on in Run-DMC’s development, Russell Simmons (Run’s brother) took it upon himself to promote the group. His goal, however, was not to make rap music with Run-DMC. He wanted to make black teenage music. And more important, Russell wanted to make successful black heroes, which he felt he did with Run-DMC and Kurtis Blow (Cepeda 49). Realness trumped being positive for Russell, however, and what defined realness according to Rush Management meant playing on some notion of the street. Run explained that their contemporary, Eazy-E of N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitude), couldn’t rap because he was truly a gangster (Quinn 73). A strategic embrace of the street, but with a calculated distance, was the signature for Run-DMC: to represent hip hop as it existed in the street, but without living the street life. The group idolized the Cold Crush Brothers, a street phenomenon in early eighties New York hip hop, but who faded into the background without the major push received by groups and labels such as the Sugarhill Gang (who received industry backing for their single “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979). In 1983 Cold Crush records were not garnering fan support, and the doors were open for something new.

“Our whole thing,” DMC says, “was to be like the Cold Crush Brothers.” (Coleman 31). Run-DMC, however, wanted to produce the best show, the best rhymes, and the best DJ, and come with more beats than anybody. Cold Crush were Run-DMC’s idols, but Run-DMC also wanted to be better than Cold Crush. In 1984 things were going well for Rush Management, the biggest management company in hip hop. Russell Simmons had Kurtis Blow and Whodini, as well as the Fearless Four. Russell also had a hip hop band called Orange Krush that included Davey DMX, Larry Smith, drummer Trevor Gale, and singer Alyson Williams, which helped form the early sound that Russell would take into the studio to later develop Run-DMC.
According to Simmons, Run-DMC’s greatest asset was that they never aspired to be bigger (Simmons 64). They aspired to keep it real, close to the street, when that wasn’t yet considered important in rap. And that attitude allowed them to outdistance all other rappers in the eighties. Rappers at the time would tell it differently. Rush Management had the handle on technology, and technology—including drum machines, amplifiers, radio, and television—is what would prove to be a boon for Run-DMC, and for hip hop in general (see sidebar: The 808). Grandmaster Caz recalled that Run-DMC was the cutoff point between the era of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Cold Crush, Funky 4+1, the Fearless 4s, the Fantastic 5s, and hip hop after that (Fricke and Ahearn 328). The pre-Run-DMC era had advanced hip hop from its bare basics, according to Caz, from a baby movement, in the park with speakers and plugging into light poles. While the Sugar Hill record label pinched pennies—denying artists drum machines and new

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**The 808**

*George Ciccariello-Maher*

The Roland TR-808 drum machine is a legendary piece of hip hop production equipment. Immediately rendered obsolete upon its release in 1980 by the superior sound and sampling technology of the Linn Drum (the Linn LM-1), the 808 was an unlikely candidate for fame. But the combination of a relatively low price tag ($1,000 compared to $5,000 for the Linn) and a classic (if notably artificial) sound made the 808 a must-have for such rap originators as Run-DMC, Eric B. & Rakim, Boogie Down Productions, and Public Enemy. Specifically, the 808 featured a deep bass kick that made it an essential ingredient of the rap sound of the mid-1980s.

Despite the fact that the 808 appeared in the work of Japanese electropop group Yellow Magic Orchestra as early as 1980, it would be through the influence of rap artists more than five years later that a younger generation would come to venerate the 808 sound. In fact, it was only after Roland had ceased production of the 808 that its popularity peaked. The 808 would find a place in the early gangsta rap of N.W.A. and its later G-Funk offshoot in the work of Dr. Dre, Warren G, and Snoop Dogg. It would even find popularity in the more mainstream hip hop of the Beastie Boys, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, Sir Mix-a-Lot, and Vanilla Ice, as well as in several genres of electronic music.

Seminal Bay Area rapper Too $hort also made use of the device on his earliest songs, and Outkast made the 808 popular in the South, resulting in the contemporary predominance of an 808-type sound in the related genres of Southern crunk (e.g., Lil Jon) and Bay Area hyphy (e.g., E-40). Kelis’s 2006 hit “Bossy,” a track that not coincidentally includes an appearance by Too $hort, explicitly hearkens back to the 808 era: “I’m back with an 808.”
turntables when asked—Def Jam invested in equipment. This is what made Def Jam different, and one reason they ultimately survived and excelled in the trickiness of the industry.

Run-DMC arrived on the cusp of a significant moment in hip hop history. In the scramble for new rap acts to get signed to major recording contracts, many acts attempted to follow in the footsteps of James Brown and other funk acts of the 1970s—big costumes, elaborate stage shows, big crews. The trend toward co-optation of rap by the mainstream was often perpetuated by rap acts themselves. In an effort to be commercially viable, many acts switched their styles from house party and corner raps to radio-friendly jingles in hopes of appealing to a mainstream demographic. Out of this environment came Run-DMC, who invigorated and reinvented the whole rap genre. From their early countercurrent putdown, “Sucker-M.C.’s,” it was obvious that Run-DMC was lean, mean, and ready to do business. Following up “Sucker-M.C.’s” with a second breakthrough single, “Rock Box,” Run-DMC asserted that they were not one-hit wonders, and they would not attempt to follow the music industry cookie cutter mold. Ira Robbins of Rolling Stone called what Run-DMC was doing by merging rap and rock “forging a new musical alliance that shattered racial barriers” (53). To many, they were Run and D from the Hollis hood; for many more they were hip hop’s ambassadors to the world.

SON OF BYFORD

The track “Son of Byford” on Raising Hell was an homage to origins. Byford was the first name of Darryl “DMC” McDaniel’s father (though, as chronicled in the 2006 VH-1 documentary “My Adoption Journey,” DMC later discovered he was adopted). Run DJed at a young age for his brother Russell’s first rap act on Rush Management, and the first solo rap act to appear on television—Kurtis Blow. Run began his study of music in his family’s attic. There he played with a drum set his father bought him when he was ten. A neighbor, Spuddy, gave him lessons. Run and Russell benefited from a supportive family, as well as a supportive community. Hollis was populated with black working-class neighbors and bustling main street with stores and movie theaters. It had a small-town feel, with everyone inevitably running into everyone else, according to Run-DMC. It was a small, remote enclave for the black working class and the children these hard-working parents hoped would have easier lives. The families of Run, Russell, and D did their best to afford their boys the best opportunities and support as they grew up. D’s brother Al, for example, one day led D into the basement. Al had purchased a second turntable (to add to a record player the brothers already had) and a $50 mixer, and had set up DJ equipment on a table. Run’s drum equipment and D’s turntables represented, in part, the privileged life that was
afforded these two members of Run-DMC. The equipment (both drums and
turntables) became a major part of Run and D’s daily routines and afforded
them early opportunities to hone and perfect their musical skills.

Run first got into music at around the age of ten after hearing radio
station WBLS. It introduced him to a world beyond Hollis, Queens—in terms
of both music and life. From that point on, Run tried to express himself
through music, dubbing himself “DJ Joe.” He taped songs from the radio,
attended block parties where residents played guitars and drums, and banged
away on the drum set his father, Daniel, had bought and installed in the attic.
Daniel supported Joe’s dream. An attendance supervisor for New York City’s
Public School District 29 and professor of black history at Pace University by
night, his father had spent the second half of the 1960s as part of the civil
rights movement. Now in the late 1970s, Joe saw his father reading aloud
from Hamlet, espousing the value of a college degree and traditional nine-to-
five jobs, and reciting his own politically charged poetry. Joe’s mother, Eve-
lyn, also supported his hobby of playing drums and writing song lyrics. An
artist with degrees in sociology and psychology from Howard University
(where she had met Joe’s father), Evelyn worked as a recreation director
for the city’s Parks Department.

Russell (born October 4, 1957) shared a bedroom with Joe on the second
floor of their home in Queens. Their father tried to get Russell a job working
at a hog dog store in Manhattan’s West Village. Russell quit this job, dream-
ing of the dangerous and extravagant life of drug dealers he witnessed on
his block. He chopped up coca-leaf incense, claiming it was foil-wrapped
cocaine, and attempted to sell it when he could. Russell needed money to
support his expensive clothing habit. He wore lizard-skin shoes, sharkskin
pants, and Stetson hats, and afforded them by selling (and using) drugs. He
kept twenty 5-ounce bags of drugs in the bushes in front of the house, and he
spent his nights in fancy nightclubs downtown, ignoring his parents’ rules and
guidance. By his senior year in high school, spring 1975, Russell was involved
with drugs. He started attending City College of New York in Harlem in the
fall of 1975. He was supposed to be studying to become a sociology teacher,
but drugs took over. Angel dust was his drug of choice and he spent his days
in the City College student lounge and going to Harlem’s hottest clubs each
night (Ronin 14). Russell’s reckless abandon and partying in Harlem of the
1970s mirrored the musical culture of the Harlem of the 1950s—when bebop
was all the rage and Harlem was the site of late nights of music, drugs, and
creative passion. To some, Russell was a lost youth, a problem child. To
others, he was in training for the biggest job of his life.

In autumn 1977, Russell found a passion beyond drugs and partying. He
came home talking about a party he had attended in the Harlem nightclub
Charles’ Gallery. He’d seen a DJ mix two copies of P-Funk’s single “Flash-
light,” and a young man named Eddie Cheeba, holding a microphone, tell a
crowd of blacks and Puerto Ricans, “Somebody, anybody, everybody
scream!” He told his parents he thought he could make money promoting shows like the one at Charles’ Gallery. He stopped selling weed and recruited schoolmates Rudy Toppin and Curtis Walker (who then rapped as Kool DJ Kurt Walker) to help him throw parties. With Russell as the mastermind and leader, the three friends printed thousands of flyers and stickers, rented halls and charged admission, and changed Curt’s stage name to Kurtis Blow. Soon Russell’s flyers claimed the Harlem-bred Kurtis Blow was really “Queens’s #1 rapper.” Creating the image required to market hip hop acts—even if it bordered on twisting the truth—would become Russell’s trademark and would prove to be invaluable in his later marketing of Run-DMC. This business model would be key to making Run-DMC into a hip hop icon and would echo in hip hop history afterward as record labels sought to play up (or invent) street aspects of a hip hop act’s credentials. But no business model survives without adequate financial backing. Russell came home one night in his promotional career complaining that no one had come to one of his events and he had lost all his money. His dad urged him to treat this as a lesson and focus on school again, but his mom handed Russell $2,000 in $100 bills she kept in her personal savings and encouraged Russell to continue. This was just another example how for Run, Russell, and Darryl support from their families and communities was crucial to their development and success as artists and entrepreneurs and proved that not only are icons made, they are also nurtured and cultivated.

DEF JAM

One day Russell heard “It’s Yours,” a record by T. La Rock & Jazzy Jay, and loved it. In a story he recalled for hip hop journalist Nelson George, Russell noticed that while “It’s Yours” was distributed by Street Wise Records, it had a little logo on it that read “Def Jam” (Simmons 77). One night at a club DJ Jazzy Jay came over and asked Russell if he wanted to meet the man who’d made “It’s Yours.” Jazzy Jay walked Russell over to this stocky, long-haired Long Island white kid. This was the man behind Def Jam, and in terms of entrepreneurial spirit and love for music, Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons had a lot in common. Rick’s inspiration to make rap records was Russell’s audio production on “Rock Box”—a strict, layered drum track that proved to be the hit from the Run-DMC debut album Run-DMC (1984). Producing the street attitude was crucial to Russell. The raw energy of rock and the rebellion of rap proved to be a perfect combination on “Rock Box” and became the musical bridge that connected Russell and Rick and encouraged their coproduction on Run-DMC’s third album, Raising Hell (1986).

Raising Hell followed several rigorous months of Run-DMC touring, many nights of which were spent writing and then performing the songs that would make the album. The intensity of a live tour performance was thus translated onto record. Doubled with Russell and Rick’s loud, sometimes chaotic sound,
Run-DMC was a marker of post-Bronx hip hop—taking it from the local to the global. This was most visible in how Run-DMC adopted and exploited the idea of the hip hop brand. The first single from *Raising Hell* was “My Adidas,” with “Peter Piper” on the B side (see sidebar: My Adidas: Hip Hop and Brand Loyalty). The group claimed they took the beat from the street and put it on television. And that’s what happened. Many artists at the time of Run-DMC’s rise played it safe, according to Run-DMC. When Kool Moe Dee, Treacherous Three, and Grandmaster Flash went into the studio they held back, tightened up their rhymes, and cleaned up the track with splicing and add-ins of lyrics. Just as Run-DMC wore street fashion onstage in the form of white Adidas and black leather suits with fedoras, they attempted to match their rhymes and attitude with the passion and energy of MCs on the street corner or at the house party. This wasn’t pioneering. Run-DMC just did on vinyl what rappers before them were doing on mixtapes.

Today, in 2006, the trajectory of hip hop recording has reversed. Mixtapes are again hugely popular (making one wonder if they ever really went out of fashion), in large part because of the proven success of guerrilla marketing of street CDs, as modeled by 50 Cent and G-Unit. 50 Cent testified to being mentored early on by Jam Master Jay of Run-DMC (50 Cent’s debut single, “Wanksta,” was produced by Jay). 50 said that Jay saw him as a kid who was trying to get out of the game, and Jay respected that. As a result, 50 said, Jay “put him on,” or recorded him on CD (50 Cent 163). It was the strategic use of technology in 50 Cent’s time, as in Run-DMC’s time, which helped lead both acts to being on the cusp of hip hop production and, more
important, distribution. In this regard, the Internet has proven recently to be
an important site of marketing and distribution for up-and-coming mixtape
DJs and rappers in 2006, who mix and remix the words and music of popular
rap artists to make a name for themselves.

Hip hop branding on a mass scale was largely an invention of Run-DMC.
Other artists on Def Jam in the 1980s felt the power of Run-DMC’s cultural
branding. It was clear that when it came to white Adidas, Run-DMC was not
loyal to the brand, but rather the brand was loyal to Run-DMC. Shifting the
terrain of cultural appropriation, Run-DMC did what they did and America
followed. Significantly, Adidas capitalized on what became a trend of rocking
shell-toe Adidas and promptly signed Run-DMC to a promotional deal. It
was nothing new to use a black image to sell products. Images of black people
abounded in advertising at the turn of the century and into the 1950s, parti-
cularly in racist ads that tied blacks to food preparation and cleaning pro-
ducts. From soap to laundry detergent to pancake mix, images of blacks have
been used to show how products might serve the American public. In the case

**My Adidas: Hip Hop and Brand Loyalty**

*Jeb Aram Middlebrook*

Branding was and is a crucial component of getting any rap project into the
hands of the buying customer. Making the customer believe in the product,
as one would a myth, is the key to brand loyalty. The Run-DMC song “My
Adidas” is sometimes characterized as crass commercialism. Run-DMC did not
set out to brand Adidas, however. The group said that they wore Adidas and
then everyone else started wearing them; but they didn’t want people to
dress like them. They just wanted people to like their beats and rhymes. An
Adidas sponsorship deal did come, in 1985, but after Run-DMC had toured
extensively with the song “My Adidas.” The story goes that the group had
everyone hold up their Adidas at a tour date at Madison Square Garden.
Someone at Adidas had heard about the group and sent a rep out to the
show. A sponsorship deal ensued. Adidas followed the street trend of wearing
Adidas. They exploited Run-DMC’s popularity to sell more shoes. In this case,
the building of an iconic brand worked for the benefit of both Run-DMC and
Adidas; both brands fed off each other. What was different and iconic about
Run-DMC, however, was that their brand influence developed on their terms.
The Run-DMC brand forced large companies, including Adidas, to adapt their
advertising and marketing in the direction Run-DMC dictated—a direction
that was black and urban, which was new to large companies and marketing
firms at the time. Run-DMC was iconic because they lived and branded a
street lifestyle true to their native Queens but marketable enough for Wall
Street. In this way, they set the stage for product placement and brand loyalty
in hip hop long after their time.
of Run-DMC, however, the group would show America another meaning for the word *serve*. In hip hop slang, “to serve” means to get the best of an opponent in a face-to-face battle of wits or moves. One could say that Run-DMC served the American marketing industry in more ways than one by developing a marketable and lucrative brand, on their terms.

What was different and iconic about Run-DMC was that their brand influence was self-directed and extremely widespread. The Run-DMC brand forced large companies, including Adidas, to adapt their advertising and marketing in the direction that Run-DMC dictated. Other companies at the time, like St. Ides malt liquor, similarly understood the symbolic importance of being attached to a hip hop brand. For a long time, brewing companies like St. Ides had targeted black, urban, working-class communities. Until the mid-1980s, malt liquor was popularly associated with an older black population. Hip hop, particularly the rap groups Run-DMC and N.W.A., changed that. These groups started to brandish and name-check malt liquor in publicity material and on record, particularly Olde English 800. These did not begin as endorsement deals but rather as what one critic called “de facto product placement,” or name dropping based on preference, not payment. The de facto product placement by rappers in 2006 of Cristal—a high-end champagne—is a case in point. Cristal executives openly admit to not courting (and in some cases not wanting) the business of the hip hop elite; however, the popularity of Cristal among the top rappers, and those fans that aspire to live the rapper’s lifestyle, made a big enough financial impact that Cristal has been forced to adapt to the urban market. Run-DMC was the forerunner of this type of relationship with big business. The group was unique because they lived and sold a lifestyle. They retooled the notion of rags to riches to fit their demographic—black, young, urban. Their lifestyle was street to *riche*; and the concept of the high life took on new meaning.

Run-DMC’s contemporaries noticed their impact. Reggie Reg of the Crash Crew said they wanted to do what Run-DMC was doing at the time. He remembered Run-DMC opening for the Crash Crew at a show in Broadway International. He described the new, streetwise persona conveyed by Run-DMC: “We was not allowed to do stuff like that on Sugarhill. . . . We couldn’t curse on Sugarhill” (Fricke and Ahearn 328). With the arrival and increasing ascendancy of hip hop with Run-DMC, a consumer-driven market developed. Companies like Adidas and St. Ides, and later Nike, McDonald’s, Cristal, and so on embraced hip hop culture. What Run-DMC dictated in the rap business was a careful balance between street culture and entrepreneurialism. They took the corner hustle to the hip hop industry board room and beyond.

**WALK THIS WAY**

Run-DMC broke further into the mainstream on both sides of the Atlantic in 1986 when, at Rick Rubin’s suggestion, they released the heavy metal–rap
collision “Walk This Way.” Its distinctive video caught the imagination of audiences worldwide, and the single rocketed into the U.S. Billboard Top 10 (see sidebar: Hip Hop Video: The Importance of Run-DMC’s Visuals to 1980s MTV Viewers). The success of this single had been predicted by the earlier singles “Rock Box” and “King of Rock,” both of which fused rap with rock. By 1987, *Raising Hell* had sold 3 million copies in the United States, becoming the first rap album to hit the R&B number one mark, the first to enter the U.S. Top 10, and the first to go platinum. Run-DMC also became the first rap act to have a video aired by MTV, the first to be featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, and the first nonathletes to endorse Adidas products.

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**Hip Hop Video: The Importance of Run-DMC’s Visuals to 1980s MTV Viewers**

*Jeb Aram Middlebrook*

The iconic status of Run-DMC depended as much on their image as their sound. Run-DMC was responsible for the first rap video on MTV—“Rock Box” from their debut album *Run-DMC* in 1984. If video killed the radio star, it made the rap radio star; and Run-DMC was the group to capitalize on the use of image to sell the group. The album *Run-DMC* went gold (500,000 copies sold), a testament to the rotation it received on MTV as well as on radio. Run-DMC’s style and sound achieved national reach through television in way that was unprecedented for rap music. The group’s second album, *King of Rock* (1985), was also promoted through a video for its lead single. The video “King of Rock” featured Run and DMC vandalizing the rock hall of fame, a visual statement that rap would be the new rock for the 1980s and Run-DMC would be its forerunners. Run-DMC broke down more walls with their video for the hugely successful “Walk This Way.” This 1986 video collaboration with then-struggling rock band Aerosmith helped promote the single from their third album, *Raising Hell*. The album would also become the first rap record ever to go platinum and eventually triple platinum, in part from the immense reach that the video had nationally and globally. The video began with Aerosmith vying for sonic supremacy in adjacent studios—Aerosmith with rock guitars, Run-DMC with heavy bass drums and Jam Master Jay’s record scratch. Aerosmith eventually breaks through the wall, struggling for recognition in the song. Ultimately, Run-DMC takes over the rock stage and rock audience Aerosmith commands in the video, offering yet another visual statement that Run-DMC would replace the rock icons of the past. The power of the video was cosigned by MTV. “Walk This Way” was nominated for two MTV Video Music Awards for Best Stage Performance Video and Best Overall Performance in 1987 and was consistently recognized by MTV through 2006 as being among the top videos and top songs of all time.
There were numerous hits on *Raising Hell*. But none hit harder than their first worldwide smash, “Walk This Way,” a cover of the Aerosmith rock classic featuring group members Steven Tyler and Joe Perry. Rick Rubin’s rock approach combined with Russell Simmons’ street aesthetic for Run-DMC was a big reason why the album ended up selling 6 million copies in the United States and approximately 10 to 11 million copies worldwide. “Walk This Way” was the album’s second single but the first video, and arguably a main reason the single rose to the top of the charts so quickly. Television as a vehicle for music advertising and marketing came into its own with MTV (the music television of the 1980s). A station based on the promotional videos supplied by record companies, MTV obtained virtually free programming with which they could garner revenue from advertisers. MTV was successful because they made treasure out of relative trash content, effectively reusing and recycling promotional throwaway videos as stock footage for their prime-time rotations. This was before videos became a major budget item for an artist’s career and could expect to go for upward of $300,000 or more. Before Run-DMC, MTV had focused exclusively on rock videos. “Rock Box,” the hit single from Run-DMC’s debut album, *Run-DMC*, claimed the spot as the first rap video on MTV. Its rock flavor and simplistic bass-and-kick-drum eased its way into the MTV rotation. “Walk This Way” is sometimes erroneously credited with this achievement because of its incredible crossover with rock fans globally.

“Walk This Way” was something special, however. The beat from the Aerosmith song was one that Run-DMC had always rapped over in their Hollis neighborhood, but they didn’t know the group’s name at the time. Run and D had their own rhymes over the beat but once in the studio, they were told to do Aerosmith’s lyrics as a cover song. How far rock and roll would take them from their rap roots was a question the group negotiated even during the recording of the track. Jam Master Jay—the recognizable visionary of the group—claimed early on that “Walk This Way” had the potential to be a hit. Despite having their own lyrics on the track and not wanting to follow their contemporaries in writing pop tunes for radio, Run and D went into the studio and recorded Aerosmith’s words. The lyrics, as they were recorded, did not match the Aerosmith vocals. Whether or not “Walk This Way” sounded like Aerosmith, it sounded like a hit to everyone.

The record “Walk This Way” was a rebirth and a birth, according to D (Coleman 36). The song made room for acts like the Beastie Boys, Kid Rock, Limp Bizkit, Korn, and P.O.D., and forever changed the sound of rock, period. Most rock bands today, for example, emphasize the second and fourth beats in a four-beat measure. Boom-boom, clap. Boom-boom, clap. This is the echo of Run-DMC and more specifically “Rock Box,” their first rock-rap record. Rock for Run-DMC was street. The group recalled that they had rapped over rock beats in the streets of Hollis. Rock signified being hard, or tough, and that was the image the group intended to portray. D mentioned that other rap groups didn’t use rock as much because they didn’t know how. The balance
of street and mainstream, rap and rock, black and white was mastered by Run-DMC. They matched wailing guitar lines with sparse but forceful drum machine beats and turntable scratches. Rap-rock, Def Jam, and Run-DMC sounded like rebellion to music listeners everywhere in the mid-1980s.

The Def Jam logo—one of the most memorable logos in the rap game according to Russell Simmons—was Rick Rubin’s work. Ironically, Rick thought when rappers said “death” (which in the eighties was a slang term of affirmation), they were really saying “def” (Simmons 80). Russell said that white rock and roll or alternative people or suburban people coming into hip hop culture—their version of the black ghettos is always more dramatic. This would become clear also as Def Jam label mates the Beastie Boys, burst onto the scene as an all-white rap group with beats and mannerisms that were loud and raucous, à la Run-DMC. Being from middle-class Hollis, Queens, Russell considered himself outside black ghetto culture. This outsider position perhaps allowed him to have a critical distance to hip hop culture and maybe an overly dramatic view of the ghetto as he saw in other ghetto outsiders. Ironically, Jason Mizell, whose life was eventually claimed by the street, was the only member of Run-DMC who was actually from the street. Rick, Russell, Run, and D, on the other hand were like many of their fans, a hip hop journalist once wrote; they were outside of street culture. But as Russell observed, they brought something special to hip hop because of that. They heard hip hop. They loved hip hop. But their point of entry into hip hop was different, and they manifested it differently. Rick Rubin, for example, emphasized the volume of the guitar riffs and big bass drums, making the records louder. Russell made the ultimate ghetto beat record and breakthrough for Run-DMC, “Sucker M.C.’s,” with no bass line and sparse drums. Admittedly, Russell approached “Sucker M.C.’s” differently than someone from Harlem or the Bronx would have at that time. For Russell and Rick, Run-DMC could be both rock and roll and rap at the same time, largely because both were parts of youth culture. It wasn’t about race at that level, Russell said, but an energy and attitude that rock and rap shared. Run-DMC did this without being calculated, but by being honest about what they liked and wanted to achieve musically. According to Russell, “The band and I weren’t concerned with reaching blacks or whites, but with making new sounds for people who wanted to hear them” (Simmons 80). These sounds, these expressions, of a mediated ghetto voice echoed around the world. Technology, television, media were the master’s tools, and as of 1984 the tools were in the hands of three black youths from Hollis, Queens, with a passion for big beats and street poetry.

**IS IT LIVE**

The album *Raising Hell* was the culmination of worldwide tours spanning 1984 and 1985 and a film debut in *Krush Groove*. Run-DMC wrote the
whole album on the road. “That’s why it was so dope,” DMC says. “We would write a song every night after a great performance, so we had a lot of energy and momentum going” (Coleman 32). They translated the aliveness and movement of touring onto record in 1985, over the course of three months in Manhattan-based Chung King studios. Rick Rubin was brought in to work formally with Run-DMC on the project. He took the group to his dorm room at NYU and showed them around. It seemed like Rick had every rock record in the world, DMC said. Russell promoted Run-DMC with black hats and leather to give them an iconic image—a la Michael Jackson’s glove or Cyndi Lauper’s hair, according to Russell. The black hat and leather look reportedly came from a day when Russell, Run, and D went to pick up Jay in his neighborhood. Jay came out of the house with a full leather suit and black hat on. Russell told Run and D from then on, they would wear what Jay wore. Russell hoped the rock sound and ghetto style would reach both the street and the substantial white audience, both of which identified with rock’s raw, rebellious attitude (Cepeda 47).

The impact of this new look for Run-DMC can be seen in a photo shoot of Run-DMC’s appearance on the television pilot of Graffiti Rock, a dance show that was supposed to be a hip hop version of American Bandstand (1952) or Soul Train (1971). The show was not picked up for a TV run, but the pilot aired on WPIX Channel 11 in New York City. In one famous picture by photographer Martha Cooper, rap contemporaries the Treacherous Three are poised for a freestyle battle with Run-DMC, with a crowd looking on. Run-DMC virtually leaps off the page with their stylized poses and shiny leather jackets. They were cool, they were hip, and they were conscious of always being on camera. Run-DMC gave the feel of already being celebrities, the “if you don’t know . . . now you know” look. It’s no coincidence that Run-DMC’s influence and global reach would cause young people interviewed in Germany six years later to name Run-DMC as the only rap act to achieve wider recognition in the years between 1984 and 1989. This is one major reason Run-DMC can be considered the icon’s icon in hip hop. They are the preeminent example of a rap group that became so successful as a commercial brand that they effectively erased from international public memory rap groups that came before, after, or during their time. When you win a battle as a hip hop icon, you not only beat your competition, you record over them.

**RAISING HELL**

Run-DMC responded to the frenzy over their music on record. The title track, “Raising Hell,” carried the influence of the Beastie Boys, white boy hip hop contemporaries and label mates to Run-DMC. Rick Rubin produced the Beastie Boys’ classic *Licensed to Ill* and thus production tracks jumped from
Run-DMC projects to Beastie Boys projects. “We learned that punk rock is just as hip hop as Afrika Bambaataa is. And you can be silly and still be dope,” D said (Coleman 37). The Beastie Boys opened for Run-DMC on tour, warming up all-black audiences for the pivotal rallying cry, “Whose house? Run’s house!” The house was actually brought down at one tragic event at a Run-DMC show in Long Beach, California, in 1986. The group wasn’t even onstage when several gangs decided to fight inside the concert arena. The Los Angeles Times covered it as a fight between Latino and black street gangs, which injured thirty people—some people were reportedly struck with metal chairs, wooden sticks, and, in one instance, a fire extinguisher. The fact that the LA Times put the word “rap” inside quotation marks in the coverage was a telltale sign of how the media thought about the music and culture—rap was questionable. According to Russell, gang shootings were happening all over LA at the time, but because this particular incident happened at a concert venue, it went from being gang violence to being rap violence.

When concert violence in the late eighties became an issue to the media, politicians, and parents, Run-DMC was rapping about how kids should go to school or church. Even back then, with black hats and leather pants on, Russell said, they were talking about being good and God-fearing. The push by Rush Management for Run-DMC to rhyme about positive things did little to soothe the rising insecurities that were fed to the American public by the same television, radio, and press outlets that Run-DMC relied on for their popularity. The perception of rap violence affected the concert business because it made parents keep their kids from coming out. It also made kids afraid to come out. The insurance companies and the buildings raised their fees so high that it became impossible to take tours on the road. This was the angst and artist censorship from which early gangsta rapper Schoolly D rose in Philadelphia in 1986, followed by N.W.A. in 1988, and the Death Row camp led by Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg in the 1990s. Today in 2006, the popularity of “trap rap” or rap glorifying the world of crack cocaine dealing (often occurring in traps, or crack houses) is banking ironically on the notion of rap violence as a selling point.

Run-DMC showed rappers and fans that there was a way to be hard without glorifying violence. They dealt, however, with the American media, which pegged them as dangerous black thugs, especially after the Long Beach event. Run-DMC witnessed how tenuous and media-dependent iconic status could be. Oftentimes their media coverage spoke louder than the group. At the height of the Raising Hell tour, Run-DMC’s publicist found the need to distance the group from the street—from the gangs that supported the music since the group’s beginning and who clearly had bought enough tickets for the Long Beach concert to cause a full-scale riot inside the venue. This careful balance between catering to the mainstream and to the street, assuaging the police and the street gangs simultaneously, was and is an art, an art that challenges the best MCs and managers—especially those who (like Russell Simmons) sought to produce not rap, but black teenage music led by positive black role models.
PROUD TO BE BLACK

In 1985, while Run-DMC was recording *Raising Hell* and promising to overturn American music and celebrity culture, President Ronald Reagan promised to overturn over 100 years of civil rights achievements. Deindustrialization, crack cocaine, and slashes in funding for public education and afterschool programs dropped on the block as Reganomics, and Run-DMC under the tutelage and support of future label mates Public Enemy dropped the final track on *Raising Hell*, “Proud to Be Black.” On this track, Run-DMC took seriously their duties as role models, as set out by Russell. DMC said, “We knew that there was power in this music. We could teach, we could innovate, we could inspire and motivate. We made it cool to put messages in lyrics” (Coleman 34). Notably, few rappers before Run-DMC, and certainly none selling at the same level, bragged about going to college. The group recognized that they could make education cool. In this way they could make a difference in their Queens neighborhood and around the world.

Run-DMC said that the song “Proud to Be Black” was influenced by Public Enemy, whom they often hung around with. Public Enemy didn’t have any records out, but Run, Jay, and D would still go to their radio station, WBAU in Long Island, to connect. Chuck D was like a father, mentoring and educating the up-and-coming members of Run-DMC. The group admittedly wanted to make an album that Chuck would like with “Proud to Be Black.” The members of Run-DMC all went to college and “Proud to Be Black,” they said, was more about education than about being black. The year 1986 marked a transition for Run-DMC and for hip hop in general. From the perspective of Run-DMC at the time, the options in their Hollis neighborhood were either to be a basketball player or a drug dealer. The question of opportunities for black males has echoed and re-echoed since Run-DMC’s reign. Rappers in 2006 still pose the question to their listeners: “Which will it be—the basketball or the crack rock?” Even though Run and D weren’t immersed in street life, their image as Run-DMC—as celebrities who remained connected to the streets where they grew up—gave them a degree of respect in Hollis that was not afforded other groups.

Many of their friends were convicts, murderers, and drug dealers, but they remained connected to these people even after the industry success of the group. Run and D would stand on the corner and smoke weed and drink beer in broad daylight with people from the neighborhood. People celebrated Run-DMC as a neighborhood success story—seeing someone from the block on TV delivering a positive message to the people eased the acceptance of Run-DMC as one of Hollis’s own. Run-DMC was influential and iconic in this regard because they showed in their day-to-day interactions the hip hop truism “It’s not where you’re from, it’s where you’re at.”
THE AFTER PARTY

Run-DMC was at the top of the rap game with their album *Raising Hell*. But they couldn’t stay there. Subsequent recording efforts failed to maintain their position at the forefront of rap, as their audience flocked to the hard-core political sounds of Public Enemy and N.W.A. Run-DMC’s albums *Tougher Than Leather* (1988) and *Back from Hell* (1990) contained a few tracks (“Beats to the Rhyme,” “Pause”) that were reminiscent of their earlier heyday, but the momentum for Run-DMC had waned. In the nineties, DMC and Run both experienced religious conversion. Their involvement in rap faltered, but singles continued to emerge sporadically, notably “What’s It All About,” which sampled the Stone Roses’ “Fool’s Gold.” Despite an obvious effort to make 1993’s *Down with the King* their major comeback album, with production assistance offered by Pete Rock, EPMD, the Bomb Squad, Naughty by Nature, A Tribe Called Quest, and Rage Against the Machine, and guest appearances from KRS-One and Neneh Cherry, it was hard to convince a new generation of fans that Run-DMC was as legendary in the 1990s as they were in the 1980s. Nevertheless, *Down with the King* enjoyed a respectable commercial run and, true to form, the trio enjoyed an unexpected UK chart-topper five years later with a Jason Nevins remix of “It’s Like That.”

Following *Down with the King*, Run-DMC’s extended studio hiatus lasted until April 2001 with the release of the star-studded *Crown Royal*. Tragically, the following October, Jam Master Jay was shot dead at his recording studio in Queens. Some speculate whether Jay’s involvement in a failed cocaine deal led to his murder in October 2002 (Ronin 2). New York’s Power 105 DJ and former “Yo! MTV Raps” host Ed Lover accused the rap label Murder Inc. founder Irv Gotti and Ja Rule of being behind Jay’s shooting because he had worked with 50 Cent after Murder Inc. blacklisted him. These theories have not been supported by police investigation, however, and Jay’s murder, like those of Tupac and Notorious B.I.G, remains unsolved. After the death of their bandmate, Run and D declared Run-DMC officially over. Both went on to record solo albums, and the success of Run’s show *Run’s House* on MTV and DMC’s “My Adoption Journey” on VH-1 in 2006 spoke to the adaptability and lasting power of the Run-DMC brand and legacy, despite the group’s end.

RUN-DMC’S LEGACY AND CONTINUING APPEAL

Writing of white 1920s jazzmen such as Bix Beiderbecke, LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) explained the appeal of jazz to white Americans in the music’s “profound reflection of America” (Cepeda 224). Hip hop, especially with Run-DMC, operated in a similar way. Listening to their music was a way into understanding America better. Run-DMC’s sound, with the help of
producers Rick Rubin, Russell Simmons, and Larry Smith, was unrelenting. Their style and attitude, with crisp black hats and sleek leather coats, was unshakeable. Run-DMC’s music did not demand, it commanded people to listen. Run-DMC was the undeniable sonic manifestation of murdered, enslaved, raped, and exploited souls rising up to break speakers, bust moves, drink 40s, wave college degrees, and exclaim, “Whose house?” And kids from all backgrounds, around the world, wanted to be just like them.

So what did the era of Run-DMC and *Raising Hell* mean for America? It meant that the idol, the hero, the icon for youth across the country would become black, male, and urban. The gangsta aesthetic would rule and everyone would wonder what they could do, if anything, to be down. The politics of Run-DMC manifested in their ability to stay true, to be honest, in the face of industry pressures to clean up and act right. They asserted themselves as a consciously black group, committed to the uplift of the black community, while also acknowledging that they could reach fans around the world that felt their expression of humanity and proclamation of “I am.” This defined power. This defined the hip hop icon. This defined Run-DMC—the icon’s icon.

*See also:* Beastie Boys, Public Enemy

**WORKS CITED**


**FURTHER RESOURCES**


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Run-DMC. Profile, 1984.


Raising Hell. Profile, 1986.


Down with the King. Profile, 1993.


The Beastie Boys are one of hip hop’s most innovative and adaptable groups. They have blended hip hop with punk, dub, instrumental rock, and alternative, while maintaining the music’s integrity by keeping hip hop at the core of what they do. They have gone from the hard rock and Budweiser-driven *Licensed to Ill* to speaking out against misogyny in lyrics. They have moved from New York to Los Angeles and back again, and started their own record label and magazine. They discovered LL Cool J, made out with Madonna,
and organized a series of concerts in support of Tibet. With *Licensed to Ill*, they built a new sound from Run-DMC’s merger of rap and hard rock that would become a blueprint for future rap-rock acts such as Limp Bizkit, Korn, and Linkin Park (see sidebar: Hip hop and Rock), but they abandoned this sound to consistently experiment with new forms of music. They were the

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**Hip Hop and Rock**

*Mickey Hess*

Rap and rock music first merged with Rick Rubin’s production on Def Jam albums. Def Jam promoted Run-DMC’s rock-based sound in singles like “King of Rock” and “Rock Box.” Before Run-DMC, hip hop tracks had been constructed primarily using R&B, soul, jazz, and funk records. The blending of rap and rock propelled Run-DMC to MTV airplay for audiences that consisted of rock listeners, and prompted a new wave of crossover hits from groups like the Beastie Boys, who picked up on Run-DMC’s formula. Another Def Jam group, Public Enemy, was included in *Spin Magazine*’s list of the top 100 punk groups of all time.

In 1984, Run-DMC took their use of rock music further in their collaboration with Aerosmith on “Walk This Way.” The song is essentially a cover of Aerosmith’s 1975 original with the addition of Jam Master Jay’s scratching and with the verses rapped instead of sung. Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler and Joe Perry contributed vocals and guitar to the song, and appeared in the video, in which Run-DMC and Aerosmith practice in two separate rooms with only a thin wall between them. The groups play louder and louder until Tyler ultimately breaks through the wall, signaling the end of a split between the worlds of rap and rock.

In the early 1990s, DJ Muggs picked up where Rick Rubin left off, incorporating sounds and styles from alternative rock into his production for the groups Cypress Hill, House of Pain, and Funkdoobiest. Butch Vig, who produced Nirvana’s seminal record *Nevermind* and founded the band Garbage, remixed House of Pain’s “Shamrocks and Shenanigans.” This new blend of alternative rock and hip hop was showcased on the soundtrack of the 1993 film *Judgment Night*, which was an experiment in collaborations between rap and alternative rock groups. The soundtrack mostly paired alternative rock groups with rap groups. It featured Cypress Hill backed by Sonic Youth and Pearl Jam, Sir Mix-A-Lot backed by Mudhoney, Del the Funky Homosapien backed by Dinosaur Jr., and De La Soul backed by Teenage Fanclub.

Such collaborations paved the way for a new sound called rap-rock. In the late 1990s, rap-rock came to describe groups like Limp Bizkit, Linkin Park, and Bloodhound Gang, rock bands who employed the hip hop elements of turntables and rap vocals in their music. Limp Bizkit’s Fred Durst and Bloodhound Gang’s Jimmy Pop Ali alternatively sing and rap on albums, while Linkin Park uses two vocalists: one singer and one MC. All three bands use DJs, who bring
in hip hop scratching with the band’s traditional bass, drums, keyboard, and guitar. Rock bands Sublime and Korn also employ DJs. While early records from Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys acknowledged rock’s influence on hip hop sounds, these newer bands brought hip hop’s influence into rock. Often, the lines blurred between rock and rap acts. Kid Rock released hip hop albums and toured with Too Short before he hit it big with a signature rap-rock sound that brought hip hop into play with Southern rock and even country music. Limp Bizkit featured DJ Lethal, formerly of the white rap group House of Pain. Everlast, former MC from House of Pain, released a rock album called *Whitey Ford Sings the Blues*.

first white breakthrough act, and maintained credibility after Vanilla Ice’s discrediting and throughout Eminem’s success.

When Eminem released *The Slim Shady LP* in 1999, he had to contend with the discredited image of Vanilla Ice, the white rapper who had lied about his background in the official bio he released to the press. Attempting to match the biographies of his black contemporaries in hip hop, Vanilla Ice claimed he had grown up in the streets rather than the suburbs (see sidebar: Vanilla Ice). The scandal over Ice’s fake bio reduced the hip hop credibility of white MCs. Eminem describes in his lyrics his struggle for acceptance as a white hip hop artist, even as he admits that his identity gains him a wider audience among white listeners. While he makes clear that he is not another Vanilla Ice, he claims to have been mistaken for a Beastie Boy by a fan. Five years before Vanilla Ice released his debut album, *To the Extreme*, a white hip hop group, the Beastie Boys, shared a stage with Run-DMC and Public Enemy. The Beastie Boys’ career spans over twenty years. They survived the Vanilla Ice scandal, influenced Eminem, and remain one of hip hop’s best-loved groups. They are recognized as hip hop icons, not as white rappers who made it.

The Beastie Boys are Mike D (Michael Diamond, born November 20, 1965), MCA (Adam Yauch, born August 5, 1964), and Adrock (Adam Horovitz, born October 31, 1966). The Beastie Boys’ music career began in 1979, when fourteen-year-old singer Michael Diamond formed a hard-core punk group called the Young Aborigines with guitarist John Berry and drummer Kate Schnellenbach. In 1981, bassist Adam Yauch joined the group, which was then renamed B.E.A.S.T.I.E. Boys (the name is an acronym for Boys Entering Anarchistic States Through Internal Excellence). The Beastie Boys played their first show on Yauch’s seventeenth birthday. This original lineup released one album, 1982’s *Pollywog Stew*, on the independent New York punk label Ratcage. The Beastie Boys also were featured on the Ratcage compilation *New York Thrash*. While Diamond and Yauch founded the group, the third member of the lineup for which the Beastie Boys are best known is Adam Horovitz, who first played in another punk band called the Young and the Useless, who would open shows for the Beastie Boys.
Vanilla Ice

*Mickey Hess*

Although Vanilla Ice was not the first white artist to achieve crossover success with hip hop (the Beastie Boys preceded him in 1986 and 3rd Bass in 1989), his performance marked the first time a rap artist had used being white as a gimmick. Vanilla Ice was marketed as a white artist who maintained credibility in the black community. The name Vanilla Ice and the title of his first single, “Play That Funky Music (White Boy),” played on the fact that Vanilla Ice was white, while his official artist biography from SBK Records claimed that Ice had a criminal background and gang affiliation. The bio even claimed that he had been stabbed in a gang fight. Ice’s biography seemed to fit with the stories of many black gangsta rap artists who were his contemporaries, but his true background was revealed by Ken Parish Perkins of the *Dallas Morning News*, who on November 18, 1990, published a story that disproved much of what SBK had claimed about Ice. According to Perkins, SBK press materials “portray a colorful teen-age background full of gangs, motorcycles and rough-and-tumble street life in lower-class Miami neighborhoods, culminating with his success in a genre dominated by young black males” (1A). In reality, Rob Van Winkle, who performed as Vanilla Ice, spent his teen years primarily in the Dallas suburbs and was not as involved with crime as his bio had claimed.

After the media scandal surrounding his fake bio, as well as related scandals over his sampling of the Queen and David Bowie song “Under Pressure” for his hit single “Ice Ice Baby,” and his borrowing the chorus chant from an African American fraternity, Vanilla Ice has never produced another album to break the Top 40. On 1998’s *Hard to Swallow*, he switched his style to the rap-rock sounds of groups like Limp Bizkit and Korn, who were selling well at the time. Even with this change, he has never been able to live down his Vanilla Ice persona. He recorded a rap-rock cover of his hit “Ice Ice Baby,” and he most recently resurfaced as a reality television star, appearing on the WB’s *The Surreal Life*, a show that groups former celebrities as roommates, and on NBC’s *Hit Me Baby One More Time*, on which one-hit wonders compete in performing their old songs. On an episode of *The Surreal Life*, Vanilla Ice complained about hip hop fans not being able to forget his debut album and subsequent discrediting. He spray-painted over artwork depicting his image from 1990, saying, “Die.”

*Further Resources*


These bands were heavily influenced by the energy of punk bands Bad Brains, Black Flag, and Reagan Youth. These punk roots would serve the Beastie Boys well in bringing a distinct energy to hip hop, a fusion of punk chaos, rock excess, and hip hop lyricism. Later in their career, the group would use their punk roots to gain credibility in the alternative rock era of the early 1990s, when groups like Sonic Youth and Nirvana brought punk and its influence back into the mainstream. The Beastie Boys would rerelease their punk albums as a compilation titled *Some Old Bullshit*, record new punk tracks for their albums *Check Your Head* and *Ill Communication*, and release an EP of all-new punk tracks, *Aglio E Olio*.

After Horovitz joined the group in 1983, the Beastie Boys released an EP, *Cookie Puss*, which moved away from the punk styles of their first record and toward the emerging genre of rap. *Cookie Puss* also indicated the humor the Beasties would bring to hip hop. The title track set a prank phone call to a Carvell ice cream shop to a beat. The EP also featured a reggae track, “Beastie Revolution,” which British Airways borrowed for use in a television commercial, prompting the Beastie Boys to sue. The group won $40,000 in this copyright lawsuit, but in the years to come, they would become the defendants in sampling lawsuits from artists like Jimmy Castor and James Newton.

As teenagers in the music scene in New York City in the early 1980s, the Beastie Boys were exposed to the tail end of punk’s heyday, as well as the new sounds of Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, and Kool Herc. They played at the legendary punk club Max’s Kansas City on its last night in business, and Public Enemy played some of its first shows opening for the Beastie Boys. Their position on the border of these two music movements allowed the Beastie Boys to create a distinctive sound, borrowing and adapting the sounds and styles they liked from both punk and hip hop. The Beastie Boys met Rick Rubin, a white producer who was making hip hop records in his dorm room at New York University. Rubin, along with Russell “Rush” Simmons, founded Def Jam Records, the label that signed Simmons’s brother’s group Run-DMC, as well as T La Rock, Public Enemy, LL Cool J, and other burgeoning stars. The Def Jam sound was distinctive because of Rubin’s use of hard rock drums, bass, and guitar, as opposed to the funk, R&B, and soul bass lines from which other hip hop records were mostly built. The Sugarhill Gang, for instance, had hit it big with “Rapper’s Delight,” with a bass line sampled from Chic’s “Good Times.” Rather than sampling from Kool and the Gang, James Brown, and Parliament Funkadelic, Rubin constructed hip hop tracks using AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, and live guitar from Def Jam’s resident metal band, Slayer. Rubin worked initially as part of the Beastie Boys’ stage show, as DJ Double R, but he soon left behind the turntables to work primarily in the production booth. Onstage he was replaced by a DJ named Dr. Dre, who would go on to cohost *Yo! MTV Raps*, a pivotal TV series in widening hip hop’s fan base (Dr. Dre should not be confused with the Dr. Dre who founded N.W.A. and pioneered the West Coast gangsta rap sound). In the
In 1984, Def Jam released the Beasties’ *Rock Hard* EP. This record featured the first Beastie Boys songs that could be classified as true hip hop. Their vocal

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**Def Jam Records Today**

*Mickey Hess*

Def Jam, one of the first hip hop labels to produce a steady stream of crossover hits, was founded by Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons. Originally, the label was run out of Rubin’s NYU dorm room, but with the success of groups like Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys, and LL Cool J, Def Jam soon became an industry powerhouse. However, this sudden rise to success took its toll on Def Jam. The Beastie Boys left the label after only one album, citing contract disputes and their mistrust of Simmons and Rubin. Later that same year, Rubin left Def Jam as well to form his own label, Def American.

Def American shifted its interests, releasing fewer hip hop albums than rock and heavy metal. On August 27, 1993, Rubin celebrated the “Death of Def” by conducting a funeral for the hip hop slang term *def*, which was over ten years old and which had become so popular that it was included in the tenth edition of *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*. Rubin retitled his label American Recordings and went on to release a 1994 comeback album, also titled *American Recordings*, by country music legend Johnny Cash, introducing the Man in Black to a new generation of listeners via the music video for “Deliah’s Gone.” Before Cash’s death in 2003, Rubin worked with him on two more albums, 1996’s *Unchained* and 2003’s *American IV: The Man Comes Around*. Working with Rubin, Cash covered Nine Inch Nails’ “Hurt,” Soundgarden’s “Rusty Cage,” and Beck’s “Rowboat,” among others. Rubin also released two notable hip hop albums on American Recordings: Kwest tha Madd Ladd’s *This Is My First Album* (1996), and Milk’s *Never Dated* (1994), which featured a guest appearance from Ad-Rock on “Spam.” In 2004, Rubin reemerged from the studio to appear in the video for Jay-Z’s “99 Problems,” a song Rubin produced.

Russell Simmons, in the meantime, continued to run Def Jam Records and became an entertainment mogul, expanding from music to produce HBO’s Def Comedy Jam and Def Poetry Jam, franchising “def” while Rubin retired it. Simmons launched a clothing line called Phat Pharm and worked with his wife, Kimora Lee Simmons, to produce a women’s line, Baby Phat.

Today, Def Jam continues to be a viable label and brand. They have released important albums by Method Man, Redman, Ghostface Killah, and Lil’ Kim. Sony Playstation produced two video games, Def Jam Battle and Def Jam: Fight for New York, which feature current Def Jam artists as boxers. Currently, Jay-Z is Def Jam’s CEO, and its sister label, Def Jam South, is headed by Scarface of the Geto Boys.
styles had developed in the direction of their mentors Run-DMC, but Ad-Rock, Mike D, and MCA, as Horovitz, Diamond, and Yauch now called themselves, added their own touches. They adopted Run-DMC’s manner of rapping hard, shouting or spitting each line so that each word sounded crisp and distinct, rather than delivering the smoother, almost singsong vocals of earlier MCs from Sugarhill Gang, Kurtis Blow, and the Furious Five. Like Run-DMC, the Beasties often joined together to belt out the last word of a line, giving their rap extra emphasis. Listening to Run-DMC’s song “Is It Live?” and the Beastie Boys’ “Rhymin’ and Stealin’” highlights this technique. Another vocal influence can be heard in Run-DMC’s “My Adidas,” where DMC whines “Nowwww” between lines. Ad-Rock would adapt this whine on the song “Paul Revere,” which begins, “Nowwww, here’s a little story that I gots to tell.” This nasal glide is something the Beastie Boys would make their own on Licensed to Ill. Their voices weave in and out of each other, each of them contributing to a line, rather than delivering separate verses. On “The New Style,” they incorporated a barbershop quartet feel to the final verse, with two members mock-harmonizing as the other MC delivered his verse. This was a flow they would abandon on Check Your Head, where they tended to alternate verses, and return to on To the Five Boroughs, intermingling their vocals again. Onstage during their 1998 Ill Communication tour, the Beastie Boys often recited the chorus from the Nice & Smooth song “Harmonize,” chanting “This is the way we harmonize” between their own verses.

Along with their records, energetic live concerts have always been a part of the Beastie Boys’ appeal. At the beginning of their hip hop career, the Beastie Boys toured with Run-DMC as well as Madonna during her Like a Virgin tour. Madonna, who kicked the Boys off her tour because they became too rowdy for the young girls who made up a large part of her fan base, claims she remembers making out with Adam Yauch in a dressing room. The Beastie Boys showcased their live performance style in an appearance in Krush Groove, a 1985 film dedicated to showcasing Def Jam’s stable of talent: Run-DMC, Beastie Boys, Fat Boys, and LL Cool J. The film depicted the rise of Def Jam amid the seedy nightclubs and shady business dealings of rap’s early days as a commercial form. The Beastie Boys also appeared in the Run-DMC film Tougher Than Leather (1988), which is noteworthy for Beastie Boys fans because they perform “Desperado,” a song not released anywhere else. This song features an early version of the dramatic pause the Beasties would incorporate into songs like “The New Style,” “Intergalactic,” and “Check It Out.” On “Desperado,” the music stops in mid-song, and Mike D begins his verse a capella: “M-I-K-E-D-E-E-E.”

The Beastie Boys built from the rhyme styles of Run-DMC, and credit Run, DMC, and Jam Master Jay for their contributions to the Licensed to Ill album. In 1986, though, the Beastie Boys emerged from Run-DMC’s shadow. Run-DMC had proven hip hop’s potential for continued crossover success with their albums King of Rock (1985) and Raising Hell (1986), and now the
Beastie Boys emerged with their breakthrough album *Licensed to Ill*. The Beastie Boys were significant in extending Run-DMC’s fusion of rap and rock, and also as the first white hip hop group to achieve commercial success. The Beastie Boys have acknowledged their debt to Run-DMC in several interviews and in the liner notes to their CD anthology *The Sounds of Science*, where MCA describes watching Run-DMC record vocals in the studio and being “amazed” (6). “Slow and Low,” a track on *Licensed to Ill*, was a Run-DMC song that the group had chosen to leave off their *King of Rock* album. Yauch asked if the Beastie Boys could record it for *Licensed to Ill*, and admits that they only changed two lines of the lyrics. Run-DMC is also credited with coming up with the idea to reverse the drum track on “Paul Revere,” giving the song a distinctive backward sound. In 2005, at the VH1 Hip-Hop Honors, the Beastie Boys paid tribute to the influence of their mentors and Def Jam label mates, Run-DMC.

The Beasties made their mark with Def Jam Records, recording *Licensed to Ill* under the supervision of Rick Rubin, Russell Simmons, and Run-DMC. Beyond helping to shape their sound, Def Jam was influential in developing the Beastie Boys’ image, as they adopted frat-boy personas that fit with the hard rock music Rubin brought to their records. This image is most prominent on *Licensed to Ill*’s first and biggest-selling single, the seminal “(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (To Party),” and it is an image the Boys have worked hard to live down. The Beasties became involved with hip hop just as it was becoming a viable business and producing consistent crossover songs. Their affiliation with Run-DMC, Russell Simmons, and Def Jam gave them credibility, and their pranks and personas made them fun and accessible, and just edgy enough to piss off your parents.

While it is tempting to see rap’s first white superstars as ready-made for crossover success, there are different accounts of the role race played in the Beasties’ reception. Nelson George credits *Licensed to Ill* with creating a “racial chauvinism . . . making the Beasties the first whites (but hardly the last) to be accused of treading on 100 percent black turf” (66). At the same time, George contends that rap culture never was exclusively black culture, that it was never “solely African-American created, owned, controlled, and consumed” (57). In one incident in the 1980s, the Boys themselves seemed almost ignorant of their minority status. Former Beastie DJ Dr. Dre told *Spin* magazine about a Beastie Boys performance at New York’s Apollo Theater, during which Ad-Rock yelled to the crowd, “All you niggers wave your hands in the air!” (Light 153). Although this type of crowd incitement is common for hip hop artists, Dr. Dre claims he could feel an immediate cooling in the audience’s reception of the Beasties, who were so much a part of hip hop culture that in the excitement of performing they forgot they were still outsiders. Dre says that the Beasties used the term “not maliciously, but out of warmth for their audience” (Light 153). Dre claims the incident is recorded on videotape, but the Beasties maintain that Dre made up the story. Whether
true or not, the incident became a footnote to the Beastie Boys’ long history of acceptance in hip hop.

The Beastie Boys’ interaction with black artists has been key to their career. DMC and Q-Tip agree that the Beastie Boys have maintained fans’ acceptance because they don’t try to be black (McDaniels and Kunz 84). They focus on who they are. Yet even as they don’t focus on their white identities by making it a gimmick, as Vanilla Ice did with his name and his first single, “Play That Funky Music (White Boy),” the Beastie Boys do address racism. On Paul’s Boutique, for example, they challenged racism on two songs, “Lookin Down the Barrel of a Gun” and “B-Boy Bouillabaisse.” For the majority of their career, the Beastie Boys have performed onstage with a black DJ: first with Dr. Dre, and then with DJ Hurricane, a bodyguard for Run-DMC who joined the Beastie Boys for their Licensed to Ill tour and remained with the group through 1994’s Ill Communication, after which he left to record a solo album, Tha Hurra, showing his skills as a rap vocalist as well as a DJ. Hurricane had previously recorded in side projects with Davy D (aka Davy DMX) and the Afros. His departure from the Beastie Boys was amicable; the three Beastie Boys guest starred on Hurricane’s debut album on the song “Four Fly Guys.”

After Hurricane left the group, Adam Yauch recruited Mixmaster Mike of the California DJ crew the Invisibl Skratch Piklz for the 1998 album Hello Nasty. Mixmaster Mike rounded out the group with two Adams and two Mikes, and was best introduced to Beastie Boys fans on the track “Three MCs and One DJ.” Hello Nasty marked the return of the Beastie Boys to New York, after living in Los Angeles for nearly a decade and recording three albums there. This move is significant for hip hop, where regional and coastal boundaries are carefully drawn (see Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. for more background on the East Coast versus West Coast beef of the 1990s). The Beastie Boys are among a select few groups (such as Too $hort and Tha Alkaholiks) to move across the United States and maintain their fan base, and one of the only groups to move back to their roots in midcareer.

Even with their long stint in California, New York is at the heart of the Beastie Boys. It is often erroneously reported that the Beastie Boys grew up in white suburbia. While they may have opened up white suburban listeners to hip hop, taking the torch from Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys show their New York City roots in their lyrics. Ad-Rock reminds the listener, “I’m from Manhattan” on “Hold It Now, Hit It.” Adam Yauch traces his lineage back to Ellis Island on the song “Do It,” and on “B-Boy Bouillabaisse” Mike D rhymes, “I live in the Village.” Growing up in New York City gave the Beastie Boys an eclectic view of culture, musical and otherwise. Their access to the developing hip hop scene allowed the Beastie Boys to create a style of music all their own, blending the styles of Run-DMC, T La Rock, Busy Bee, and other hip hop forerunners with the New York City punk scene that was on the wane as hip hop was on the rise. The Beastie Boys are icons because they have taken hip hop in so many directions while at the same time keeping
their music true to the foundations of hip hop culture. Their role in the early
days of commercial hip hop was balanced by their musical credibility and
their work with artists such as Run-DMC, Public Enemy, Biz Markie, A Tribe
Called Quest, and De La Soul.

LICENSED TO ILL

Ad-Rock, Mike D, and MCA grew up in New York City, but Licensed to Ill
brought rap to the suburbs. Their first MTV video was “She’s on It,” a song
that appeared on their Rock Hard EP and on the Krush Groove soundtrack in
1985, but it was their second video, 1986’s “(You Gotta) Fight for Your
Right (To Party)” that would make the Beastie Boys famous. With its electric
guitar riff and joking message of middle-class teenage empowerment, “Fight
for Your Right” was poised to extend the connections between rap and rock
culture that were begun by Run-DMC. With lyrics about not wanting to go to
school, being caught smoking, and having porno magazines confiscated by
parents, the Beastie Boys tapped into a widening hip hop audience whose
experiences were far removed from the crime-ridden New York City streets
depicted in songs like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Mes-
gage.” The “Fight for Your Right” video borrowed a jocks-versus-nerds
theme from 1980s teen movies, with the Beastie Boys playing the jocks. It
opened with parents leaving and urging their two nerdy sons to behave
themselves during their absence. The boys plan to invite friends over for soda
and pie, hoping no bad people show up. But there are the Beasties, initiating a
pie fight, smashing the television with a sledge hammer, pouring Spanish fly
in the punch, and setting a copy of Popular Mechanics on fire, while someone
is reading it. The Beasties brought punk’s energy and rock’s excess to rap
music. Concerts on the Licensed to Ill tour featured female dancers in cages, a
giant gyrating penis, and a flood of Budweiser that recalled the stage shows of
hard rock groups like Motley Crue. Yet the B-Boys also featured stage diving
from the world of punk. The “Hold It Now Hit It” music video shows live
footage of MCA performing his signature stage dive, the Fosberry Flop.

Licensed to Ill became rap’s biggest-selling album, outselling Beastie men-
tors Run-DMC. With Run-DMC, rap music had entered heavy rotation on
MTV, and the Beastie Boys were primed for this same success. Wearing a
Volkswagen hood ornament around his neck, Mike D created his own version
of Run-DMC’s hip hop fashion. Run-DMC built an image from their trade-
mark leather jackets, fedoras, and untied Adidas sneakers; Mike D sparked an
international crime spree, causing fans across the globe to steal hood orna-
ments from Volkswagens. Volkswagen even issued a statement urging kids
not to steal their logo and offering to mail them a free ornament upon request.

Vocally, the B-Boys were distinctive as well. Ad-Rock’s nasal delivery has
been called a distinctively white vocal style, but in the early 1990s he
considered collaborating with African American MCs Q-Tip (of A Tribe Called Quest) and JuJu (of the Beatnuts) to form a side group called the Nasal Poets. Ad-Rock’s vocal style influenced high-pitched MCs such as Sir Mix-a-Lot, B-Real of Cypress Hill, SonDoobie, and Insane Clown Posse, who would go on to diss the Beastie Boys in their lyrics. With label mates and mentors Run-DMC ahead of them, and producer Rick Rubin connecting rap with rock on “King of Rock,” the Beasties took hip hop uptown. They rhymed about renting blue tuxedos for the prom and breaking into classmates’ lockers. They set the stage for high school–focused singles to come, like DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince’s “Parents Just Don’t Understand,” De La Soul’s “Me Myself and I” video, and Young MC’s “Principal’s Office,” not to mention teen and child rap groups Kriss Kross and Another Bad Creation. A younger market was buying hip hop records, and their material caught the eyes of the kids. The Beastie Boys rhymed about high school, the prom, and dealing with parents, as well as becoming rap stars. They made their music accessible to a new audience. Part of Licensed to Ill’s appeal came from a mix of teen-focused subject matter and shock value. The B-Boys rhymed about getting busted for smoking and being told to turn down their loud music, but they also boasted about carrying weapons and smoking angel dust.

The Beastie Boys were managed by hip hop mogul Russell Simmons, the brother of Run from Run-DMC. Simmons would go on to expand his record label to create Def Jam South and to develop HBO’s Def Comedy Jam, Def Poetry Jam. The Beasties associated closely with Run-DMC. Their track “Slow and Low” was a Run-DMC song given to the Beasties. Run suggested that they flip the drums backward on “Paul Revere.” Musically, Licensed to Ill was built, like much of Run-DMC’s music, largely from hard rock, Led Zeppelin, and AC/DC. The album opens with a sampled drumbeat from Led Zeppelin’s “When the Levee Breaks,” and features guitar work from Kerry King of the heavy metal group Slayer, who appeared in the video for “No Sleep ’til Brooklyn.” Lyrically, they referenced punk songs like the Sex Pistols’ “Friggin in the Riggin,” rhymed about watching Columbo, eating Chef Boyardee, and having more rhymes than Phyllis Diller.

Lyrically, Licensed to Ill was a precursor to gangsta rap. There is a lot of debate over where the gangsta subgenre originated, but certain Licensed to Ill lyrics, if they don’t constitute a gangsta rap album, certainly anticipated the popularity of songs about gun play, drug use, and promiscuity. While N.W.A. popularized the term gangsta as well as the musical style and lyrical content that would characterize the West Coast gangsta sound, Ice-T lays claim to inventing the form with his song “Six in the Morning,” but Philadelphia’s Schoolly D claims he did it first on the East Coast. The Beastie Boys were fans of Schoolly D and were influenced by his style. Mike D is seen wearing a Schoolly D T-shirt in a Ricky Powell photograph, and the B-Boys played a concert in Philadelphia with Schoolly D and Just-Ice. The older, wiser Beastie
Boys may not want credit for their contributions to the development of gangsta rap, but Licensed was one of the first albums to promote gun play, drug use, and cartoonish violence to listeners in the mainstream. In fact, N.W.A.’s Eazy-E frequently sampled Licensed to Ill on his albums. If the gangsta style is characterized by its macho pose, its depictions of everyday acts of violence, and using women, money, and guns as status symbols, then Licensed to Ill is a gangsta rap record. Yet while Eazy-E and N.W.A. claimed to live the criminal lifestyle they depicted in their lyrics, the Beastie Boys have long said that they were writing fictional stories in their lyrics. MCA said in a 2006 interview, “I think most people know it’s a goof” (Martens). In the rap era before Vanilla Ice, who was discredited for having falsified his biography so he could claim to be a criminal, many MCs wrote lyrics that lay closer to fantasy than fact. The mix of violent and silly lyrics on Licensed to Ill makes listeners question how literally to take the Beastie Boys. They talked about smoking angel dust, sniffing glue, packing .22 automatics, and shooting people at parties, as well as high school pranks like giving people swirlies and breaking into someone’s locker to smash his glasses. Licensed to Ill’s blend of cartoonish and graphic violence would influence the Beatnuts, Cypress Hill, Redman, and Ill Bill. But it was before C. Delores Tucker, the PMRC, and the “Parental Advisory” stickers. In the Beasties’ lyrics, these stories came off as fantasy, even as they rhymed about shooting people and taking hard-core drugs.

Listeners must remember, though, that Licensed to Ill was toned down before its release. The version of Licensed to Ill that made it to record stores had been changed significantly: The title was originally Don’t Be a Faggot, and in an era when hip hop was overwhelmingly antidrug, the Beasties’ original lyrics had celebrated crack cocaine. Before the album hit shelves, the Beasties removed the line “I smoke my crack” from “Rhymin and Stealin.” They removed the track “Scenario,” which also included a reference to smoking crack and was later heard in the film Pump Up the Volume. The Web site Beastiemania.com reports that after the Beastie Boys parted ways with Def Jam, the label recruited Public Enemy’s Chuck D to produce a Beastie Boys album called The White House, working from tracks like “Scenario” and “Desperado” that the Boys had recorded but not released. Although the existence of a Chuck D-produced album has never been proven, several of these tracks, in their original forms, have been bootlegged on releases such as Original Ill, or uploaded on music-sharing Web sites.

Even with these omissions, Licensed to Ill depicted an adolescent male fantasy world, somewhere between punk rock’s energy and fraternity films like Animal House, somewhere between arena rock’s excess and punk’s playfulness. Their home video and tour booklet from Licensed to Ill celebrates the rock star lifestyle: hotel pranks, trashing rooms, groupies. The video shows them dumping water on sleeping reporters, pouring honey on groupies, and signing breasts with a magic marker. They were known for showcasing a giant inflatable penis onstage. Ad-Rock was arrested in England after a fan
accused him of using a baseball bat to hit a beer bottle into the audience. Making an even greater impression on England, the Beastie Boys refused to sign autographs one afternoon, leading the *Daily Mirror* to run the headline “Pop Idols Sneer at Dying Kids.” Their antics are documented in the *Licensed to Ill Tour Video* and the *Official Licensed to Ill Tourbook*. This was a lifestyle the Beasties would work hard to live down in their later music. As gangsta rap became hip hop’s biggest-selling subgenre, the artists became concerned with being “real,” which is to say actually living the lifestyle promoted in lyrics. Yet the Beasties have talked openly about their construction of personas on *Licensed to Ill*. As MCA says in the *Sounds of Science* liner notes, though, with their success they slowly became the characters they played: drunken, prank-playing frat boys. While they would change their personas on *Paul’s Boutique*, they would retain some of the elements of *Licensed to Ill*. Ultimately, though, they began a pattern of change and evolution, both in terms of music and persona.

**PAUL’S BOUTIQUE**

The Beastie Boys split with Def Jam in 1988. Having broken away from their producer Rick Rubin and manager Russell Simmons, as well as the thriving Def Jam label itself, the Beasties found themselves looking for new musical direction. In the three years between the 1986 release of *Licensed to Ill* and their 1989 follow-up, *Paul’s Boutique*, the three Beastie Boys explored other artistic outlets. Adam Horovitz moved from New York to Los Angeles and landed a role in the film *Lost Angels* (1989). In this film, as well as 1992’s *Roadside Prophets*, in which Horovitz costarred with punk icon John Doe, he played a troubled teen. His bandmates, meanwhile, were playing music with side projects while taking a break from the Beastie Boys after the grueling schedule of the *Licensed to Ill* world tour. MCA recorded music in a side project with Bad Brains’ Darryl Jennifer, a friend from the Beasties’ punk days. Mike D performed with a group called Flophouse Society.

After Diamond and Yauch joined Horovitz in Los Angeles in 1988, the Beastie Boys signed with Capitol Records and began working on their next album. They sought out LA producers the Dust Brothers, who would produce crossover radio hits for Tone Loc and Young MC. The Dust Brothers created a denser, more sample-laden sound for the Beasties, although it did not translate to crossover hits. The Beastie Boys began rhyming over tracks that the Dust Brothers had intended to stand alone as instrumentals, tracks that were built from a collage of samples rather than the simpler beats and loops employed by Rubin on *Licensed to Ill*. The Beasties were already known for the eclectic mix of pop culture references in their lyrics, and the Dust Brothers brought this same philosophy to their music. *Paul’s Boutique*’s mix of sounds
ranges from Dolly Parton’s “9 to 5” to Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues,” the Ramones, the Beatles, Bob Marley, and the theme from Psycho. This was a different kind of sampling than Rick Rubin had used on Licensed to Ill, which was mostly bass lines, drums, and guitar looped to create beats. Paul's Boutique brought in more pieces of vocals and wove them into the Beasties’ lyrical pastiche of references to 1970s professional basketball, skate culture, punk, Japanese culture, and so on. With its range of samples, Paul’s Boutique created a cultural mix that the Beastie Boys furthered in their lyrics.

Paul's Boutique is an album that would be very difficult to make now that digital music sampling regulations are more clearly defined. In fact, the release of Paul’s Boutique was held up because of a lawsuit over a sample on Licensed to Ill’s “Hold It Now Hit It.” That song sampled the words “Yo, Leroy,” and a piece of a drumbeat from Jimmy Castor’s 1977 song “The Return of Leroy (Part One).” The Beasties had also been on the other side of a sampling lawsuit, having sued British Airways over the use of their song “Beastie Revolution” from 1983’s Cookie Puss. This legal battle with Castor, though, would set the stage for future copyright litigation against the Beastie Boys from composer James Newton. In 1991, Singer-songwriter Gilbert O'Sullivan would sue Beastie Boys collaborator Biz Markie for the use of his song “Alone Again (Naturally)” (see sidebar: Sampling Lawsuits).

**Sampling Lawsuits**

*Mickey Hess*

In the late eighties and early nineties, the music business faced a series of lawsuits between artists, labels, and publishing companies, all centering on hip hop’s invention of digital sampling. Sampling is the process by which hip hop producers extract pieces of existing records and then reassemble them into a new hip hop song. Clearing samples is complicated because the rights to the sheet music and the recording often are held by different entities. Generally speaking, musicians retain the rights to their composition, while record labels assume the rights to the recording. At that time, before there existed a defined legal system of clearing samples, artists such as De La Soul, Biz Markie, and the Beastie Boys were sued by the musicians they sampled.

In 1989, the pop group the Turtles sued De La Soul for sampling sounds from their song “You Showed Me” in De La’s “Transmitting Live from Mars.” In 1991, artist Biz Markie lost a lawsuit to singer-songwriter Gilbert O’Sullivan after Biz sampled Sullivan’s “Alone Again (Naturally)” in his song “Alone Again.” Such lawsuits would change the way hip hop artists constructed their music in the studio, and would lead to a new system of sampling clearinghouses, which worked to negotiate song royalties between record companies and to ensure that the original musicians were compensated. Unfortunately, sampling clearinghouses remain fairly inaccessible to hip hop artists who do not record for major record labels.
The Beastie Boys, who sued British Airways in the early 1980s for using sounds from their album *Cookie Puss* in a commercial, have faced sampling lawsuits from Jimmy Castor and, more recently, composer James Newton, who in 2002 sued the B-Boys for not clearing the rights to a sequence of three notes (C–D-flat–C) Newton composed for his song “Chorus.” The group had cleared all rights to the recorded music with Newton’s record label, ECM, but had not cleared their use of the musical composition, for which Newton still owned the rights. The Beastie Boys argued that their sampling of only three successive notes, originally composed by Newton, on their song “Pass the Mic,” did not breach copyright because a sequence so brief (six seconds) does not constitute a musical composition. In a letter posted to their Web site the group argues, “If one could copyright the basic building blocks of music or grammar then there would be no room for making new compositions or books” (www.beastieboys.com). The Beastie Boys extend their print analogy to argue that in digitally manipulating Newton’s recorded flute performance to change its tone and duration, they effectively changed the notes Newton composed. Although the Beastie Boys won the lawsuit, they lost their counter-suit to recover their legal costs, which they estimated at $100,000.

Further Resources


Visually, the cover and liner notes for *Paul’s Boutique* are something in themselves. The twelve-inch record folded out to five feet of insert panels including all lyrics from the album. This artistic direction was taken further in the impressionistic music video for the song “Shadrach.” Artists worked from film of a Beastie Boys performance and created frame-by-frame oil paintings, which were then animated for the music video. The video for “Lookin Down the Barrel of a Gun” was filmed with a fish-eye lens and an infrared camera, both of which the B-Boys would use in future videos.

With their second hip hop album, the Beasties were already looking forward and backward. They revised lyrics from their punk song “Egg Raid on Mojo” for “Egg Man,” a track built around the *Psycho* theme. They used live drums and bass on the record. The album ended with “B-Boy Bouillabaisse,”
a collection of several short tracks that featured the Beastie Boys’ range of styles. While the Dust Brothers’ production was groundbreaking, so were the Beastie Boys’ rhymes. *Paul’s Boutique* is truly Mike D’s album. He smoothed out the vocal style he had invented on *Licensed to Ill* and delivered mack rhymes like “I’m so rope they call me Mister Roper.”

Today, *Paul’s Boutique* is considered a hip hop classic, but its initial sales were disappointing. The album took hip hop music places it hadn’t gone before. The release of *Paul’s Boutique* the same year as De La Soul’s *3 Feet High and Rising* made 1989 a turning point for hip hop. The Beastie Boys have said that De La Soul beat them to the punch by releasing their innovative album in the months before *Paul’s Boutique*, but the competition between these groups has been friendly. The B-Boys would later invite De La Soul to perform at their 1996 and 1997 Tibetan Freedom Concerts, and Mike D and Ad-Rock would guest star on De La Soul’s “Squat” on their 2003 album *AOI: Bionix*.

**CHECK YOUR HEAD**

*Check Your Head* was the first major-label album in which the Beastie Boys took control of their own musical production. Working on their own without Rick Rubin, who engineered *Licensed to Ill*, or the Dust Brothers, who produced *Paul’s Boutique*, the B-Boys recorded *Check Your Head* in their own G-Son Studios, and took hip hop in yet another direction as they returned to the live instrumentation of their punk rock origins. Ad-Rock’s guitar, MCA’s bass (including the stand-up bass), and Mike D’s drums feature prominently on *Check Your Head*. The album even concludes with an instrumental track, “In 3’s,” which combines live instruments with digital sampling. The B-Boys did not turn their backs on traditional hip hop production, but instead merged it with punk, funk, and rock to create a unique new Beastie Boys sound. Certain tracks, including their third single, “Gratitude,” didn’t sound like hip hop at all. Fuzzed out guitars and distorted vocals (MCA claims that they were just using cheap microphones) brought the Beastie Boys’ sound into the alternative rock era. Around this same time, Philadelphia hip hop group the Roots were getting attention for playing instruments. The liner notes made the Beastie Boys’ musicianship clear with a photo of the band playing instruments in the studio.

Yet the old-school rhymes of “Pass the Mic,” their first single from the album, which maintained the vocal interplay of *Licensed to Ill*, and the hip hop samples (they sampled dialogue from *Wild Style*, one of the first hip hop films) made clear that the Beastie Boys were not leaving hip hop behind. They enhanced their lineup with keyboardist Money Mark Nishita, whom they had originally hired to build cabinets for their recording studio. Mark’s work is best heard on “Gratitude.” He would remain with the group through their next album, *Ill Communication*, release a solo album on the Beastie Boys’
Grand Royal label, and open for the B-Boys during some dates on their Hello Nasty tour in 1998.

*Check Your Head* was the first Beastie Boys release to bear the label Grand Royal (though it shared the bill with Capitol Records). The name Grand Royal is borrowed from Erick Sermon of EPMD, who called himself “the MC grand royal” on the song “Hostile.” The label is one Mike D, Ad-Rock, and MCA started to take control of their own music, as well as release albums from bands that they liked. They started *Grand Royal Magazine*, a tribute to pop culture and a forum for promoting new music acts.

*Check Your Head* could be called the Beastie Boys’ comeback album. While *Paul’s Boutique* is considered a hip hop classic, sales had been disappointing, and it had been three years since a Beastie Boys single had hit the radio. In this three years, a lot had changed in hip hop. The biggest difference was Vanilla Ice. The B-Boys had always been readily accepted because they got into the rap game so early, but as hip hop was crossing over to mainstream radio, and with Vanilla Ice outselling black artists like the Beasties did before him, there was a new mistrust of the white artist. The Beastie Boys had been out of the public eye for three years and needed to come back strong. Their first single was “Pass the Mic,” but they broke through to alternative music fans with their second single, “So Whatcha Want?”

With the 1992 release of “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” Nirvana had given birth to the alternative rock era, bringing a new, punk-influenced style of rock to MTV and the radio. The Beastie Boys were primed to tap into this new market as well. Glen Friedman, famous for his skateboard photography, shot the cover for *Check Your Head*, and the B-Boys further emphasized their connections with skateboard and snowboard culture in lyrics. Adam Yauch became an avid snowboarder, and a snowboarding trip to Asia would ultimately lead him to his interest in Buddhism and the plight of Tibet.

Even with these new interests, the Beastie Boys maintained their connection to old-school hip hop. *Check Your Head*’s first single, “Pass the Mic” contained old-school lyrics like “Rock rock y’all, hip-hop y’all,” that recalled the origins of MCs as crowd motivators who helped drive people to the dance floor while the DJ played records. The album featured a song, “The Biz vs. the Nuge,” with old-school icon Biz Markie, who began his career beatboxing for Roxanne Shante and performing with the Juice Crew. Further asserting their connections with hip hop, the B-Boys collaborated with Cypress Hill’s B-Real on a remix of “So Whatcha Want?,” and Ad-Rock and Mike D collaborated with Milk (formerly of Audio Two) on “Spam,” a song from his 1994 album *Never Dated*, released by Rick Rubin’s American Recordings.

With the live instrumentation on *Check Your Head*, the Beastie Boys were returning to their roots, but not yet including punk tracks like they would on *Ill Communication*. In between these new albums, they released *Some Old Bullshit*, which combined their early hard-core record *Pollywog Stew* with *Cookie Puss*. In the other direction, they released a compilation of instru-
mentals, *The In Sound from Way Out*. Were the B-boys moving away from hip hop?

**ILL COMMUNICATION**

If *Check Your Head* suggested that the Beastie Boys were moving away from their hip hop roots, a listen to 1994’s *Ill Communication* would appear to confirm this transition. While the album opens with “Sure Shot,” an energetic track driven by a doctored flute sample and peppered with the Beastie Boys’ trademark mix of cultural references (lyrics from this song reference professional baseball player Rod Carew, cartoonist Vaughn Bode, and the action film *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*), the mood shifts quickly to punk on track two, “Tough Guy,” and track sixteen, “Heart Attack Man,” a mock tribute to Beastie Boys associate and music journalist Bob Mack. Subsequent tracks are devoted to a violin-driven instrumental (“Eugene’s Lament”), an instrumental tribute to another friend, hip hop photographer Ricky Powell (“Ricky’s Theme”), and Tibetan-inspired songs (“Shambala” and “Bodhisattva Vow”). The album’s back cover features the eight people who worked on the album: Ad-Rock, Mike D, and MCA, along with DJ Hurricane, Keyboard Money Mark, producer Mario Caldato Jr., and percussionists Amery “Awol” Smith (who played drums on “Tough Guy” and “Heart Attack Man”) and Eric Bobo (a bongo player who would later join Cypress Hill). The influence of this cast of characters on the Beastie Boys’ sound was evident. Out of the album’s twenty tracks, only nine are hip hop songs.

This formula, however, would not lose the Beastie Boys their fan base. *Ill Communication*’s first single, “Sabotage,” although not a hip hop song, was propelled to success by Ad-Rock’s screaming rock vocals, Mike D’s drums, MCA’s powerful bass lines, and a video directed by skateboard filmmaker Spike Jonze, which featured the Beastie Boys as characters in a 1970s police drama. “Sabotage” did employ turntable scratching and samples, but it was by no means a hip hop song. At the same time, “Root Down” serves as a tribute to hip hop’s pioneers. “Root Down” samples funk pioneer Jimmy Smith’s song of the same title. Mike D’s lyrics reference classic New York City hip hop radio shows like Zulu Beats, as well as the classic MC battle between Busy Bee and Kool Moe Dee. The “Root Down” video consists almost entirely of film footage of the 1980s New York hip hop scene: b-boys, graffiti artists, turntablists, and MCs. The success of “Root Down” led the Beastie Boys to release a *Root Down* EP, which featured two remixes of the song and some live tracks, including “Time to Get Ill,” from European concerts. On the *Tibetan Freedom Concert* CD, the Beastie Boys included their performance of “Root Down,” in which their music is replaced midway through by the classic breakbeat “Apache,” taken from the 1960 song “Apache,” written by Jerry Lordan, recorded by the Shadows, and made
famous in hip hop circles by Sugarhill Gang. In their live performances, the Beastie Boys maintained the tradition of old-school MCs, who would continue rhyming as the DJ changed the record.

Beastie Boys concerts had always been known for their energy. In 1994, they joined Lollapalooza, the annual concert founded by Jane’s Addiction singer Perry Farrell, and known to include one or two hip hop acts within a roster of primarily alternative rock groups. The Beastie Boys shared a bill with Green Day, L7, the Breeders, the Boredoms, George Clinton’s P-Funk All Stars, Nick Cave, A Tribe Called Quest, and Smashing Pumpkins, who took Nirvana’s place after that band backed out shortly before Kurt Cobain’s suicide in April 1994.

MCA’s Tibetan Freedom Concert, first staged in 1996, borrowed Lollapalooza’s mix of bands from different musical genres, yet amplified the range and number of bands included and confined the concert to a three-day affair as opposed to Lollapalooza’s summer-long tour. The Tibetan Freedom Concert brought together some of the world’s biggest acts to raise awareness of China’s occupation of Tibet. The concerts grew out of MCA’s conversion to Buddhism. Yauch’s personal transformation played out in lyrics as well. Ill Communication furthers the Buddhist themes begun by the song “Namaste” on Check Your Head. The songs “Shambala” and “Bodhisattva Vow” emphasize the changes in MCA’s life, and on “Sure Shot” he offers a “long overdue” apology for the Beasties’ treatment of women in their Licensed to Ill lyrics (see sidebar: Treatment of Women in Lyrics).

Yet MCA’s conversion had not stopped him from indulging in the pranks and humor for which the Beastie Boys were known. He had previously direc-

Treatment of Women in Lyrics
Mickey Hess

In the frat-boy humor of their 1986 debut Licensed to Ill, the Beastie Boys present women as groupies, celebrate the libido-enhancing attributes of Spanish fly, and, on “Paul Revere,” suggest performing sexual acts with a Wiffle ball bat. Twelve years later, at the 1998 Reading Music Festival, a more evolved Beastie Boys requested that British hard dance group the Prodigy not perform their hit single “Smack My Bitch Up,” the chorus of which adapts Kool Keith’s lyrics from the Ultramagnetic MCs song “Give the Drummer Some.”

The Prodigy’s music video for “Smack My Bitch Up” caused controversy on MTV, which agreed to play the video only after 10 p.m., and to preface it with a written warning and a spoken statement from MTV veejay Kurt Loder, who justified the video’s graphic imagery as artistic. The video, shot from the perspective of one central character, follows that character through bars and strip clubs, where the character gropes female dancers. The video ends with the central character facing a mirror, revealing to the viewer that she is actually a woman.
After the Prodigy refused to cut the song from their set list at the Reading Festival, the Beasties spoke publicly against the single. Although the Prodigy accused them of hypocrisy, the Beastie Boys had attempted to atone for their earlier lyrics on 1994’s “Sure Shot,” where they call for a “long overdue” end to disrespecting women. On 1998’s “Song for the Man,” they plead with men to approach women with respect. Since the mid-1990s, the Beastie Boys have often revised their old lyrics in concert, replacing or omitting sexist lyrics from Licensed to Ill. Even with these efforts, their public dispute with the Prodigy highlights the trouble the Beasties have had living down their Licensed to Ill image.

The Beastie Boys have long demonstrated their dedication to correcting the misogynist images they put forth on Licensed to Ill, where songs like “Girls” suggested that women were only useful for washing dishes, cleaning bathrooms, and having sex. They worked to revise this message in the Lollapalooza 1994 tour booklet, where the Beastie Boys urged their male fans to respect their female fans’ right to have a good time without being harassed. Speaking about mosh pit etiquette, they reminded fans to keep their hands to themselves and resist the urge to cop a feel when women are crowd surfing. This advice to male concertgoers echoed the riot grrl movement that began in punk rock and alternative rock cultures in the nineties. Ad-rock, who is married to Kathleen Hanna, founder of the riot-grrl movement, has been most vocal of the three Beastie Boys in addressing issues of women’s safety at concerts. In his acceptance speech at the 1999 MTV Video Music Awards, Ad-Rock spoke against the sexual assaults that had occurred at Woodstock 1999. He called for musicians to take an active role in protecting their fans and to educate concert promoters and security guards about rape and sexual harassment: “Talk to the promoters and make sure they’re doing something about the safety of all the girls and the women that come to our shows.”

Further Resource

was responsible for the ideas for George Lucas’s *Star Wars* movies. Hornblower was escorted from the stage.

Outside the band itself, the three Beastie Boys members were involved in other projects. While Yauch devoted time to directing videos and raising money for Tibet via the Milarepa Fund, Adam Horovitz and Michael Diamond created new outlets as well. Ad-Rock recorded a side project with Beastie Boys percussionist Awol. BS2000, or Beat Science 2000, lies somewhere between hip hop and the hard-core techno sounds of groups like Grand Royal’s Atari Teenage Riot, and showcases Ad-Rock’s prowess on the EMU SP-12, a classic sampling machine that he used heavily in creating BS2000’s two full-length albums. In the years after *Ill Communication* was released, the Grand Royal Records stable of artists was expanding, and Mike D embraced his CEO role much in the way Jay-Z would with Roc-A-Fella a few years later. Grand Royal signed Cibo Matto, Atari Teenage Riot, Butter 08, Ben Lee, and Luscious Jackson, featuring original Beastie Boys drummer Kate Schnellenbach. The label also released a Mike D side project called Big Fat Love, and reissued a record, *Real Men Don’t Floss*, from the Young and the Useless, Ad-Rock’s pre-Beastie Boys punk band. Looking to the past and the future at once, the Beastie Boys released *Some Old Bullshit*, which compiled their initial punk EPs *Pollywog Stew* and *Cookie Puss*, which were both long out of print. Also, they released *Aglio e Olio*, an EP of new punk songs. These two releases marked, for the most part, the end of the Beastie Boys’ return to recording punk music. Only one track, “Remote Control,” from their next full-length album, 1998’s *Hello Nasty*, would sound even remotely like punk.

**HELLO NASTY**

In keeping with the theme of looking to both past and future, *Hello Nasty* was at once futuristic and old school. MCA invokes “the family tree of old school hip hop” on “Intergalactic,” and on “Unite,” Ad-Rock proclaims, “In the next millennium I’ll still be old school.” The latter song’s lyrics play on the famous opening words of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel’s *Communist Manifesto*, yet rather than urging the workers of the world to unite, the B-Boys call out for break dancers, MCs, and DJs to band together. *Hello Nasty*, named for the way a receptionist was known to answer the phone for the Beastie Boys’ publicist Nasty Little Man, marked both a return to a truer hip hop sound as well as unprecedented innovations in that sound. Produced primarily by Adam Horovitz, *Hello Nasty* is a beat-focused album. Ad-Rock himself claims to be a “Benihana chef on the SP-12,” citing the EMU SP-1200, a classic sampling machine from the 1980s, still favored by many hip hop producers because it combines digital sampling technology with analog filters, giving the music a gritty and unpolished sound less available to producers
using the MPC-3000 (a more technologically advanced sampler) or digital production software such as ProTools.

*Hello Nasty* also marks the addition of Mixmaster Mike to the Beastie Boys lineup. One song, “Three MCs and one DJ,” is devoted to introducing this new DJ to listeners and showcasing his unique scratch techniques. The track begins with a message Mixmaster Mike left on Adam Yauch’s answering machine, offering his services as a world-class DJ and giving Yauch a listen to his new innovation, “the tweak scratch,” which he achieved by hooking his turntables to a wah-wah pedal designed for guitars. DJ Hurricane, who had worked with the B-Boys since *Licensed to Ill*, had departed to record solo albums as an MC. His skills as a DJ had mainly been utilized in concert, and up to that point most of the scratching heard on Beastie Boys albums had been done by one of the two Adams: MCA or Ad-Rock.

As energetic as DJ Hurricane had been in concert, Mixmaster Mike added an entirely new element to the Beastie Boys’ stage show. Mike had performed with the DJ Crew Invisbl Skratch Piklz and competed in turntable competitions between DJs, and as a turntablist who had performed without MCs, his style of abruptly switching records or suddenly slowing down or speeding up a beat gave a new feature of improvisation to Beastie Boys concerts. Mixmaster Mike tends to open each song with the original music heard on the album, then switch records for the second and third verses. I saw the Beastie Boys perform on the 1998 *Hello Nasty* tour in St. Louis, Missouri, and it was obvious that Mixmaster Mike was given free reign on stage. In fact, the three Beastie Boys often showed surprise at his choice of record, and even stopped in the middle of performing “The Skills to Pay the Bills” to ask their new DJ to change the record, because it didn’t fit with the tempo of the song. Ordinarily, though, Mike D, Ad-Rock, and MCA show remarkable adaptability, working their vocals into new tempos and rhythms to fit with the changes Mixmaster Mike throws at them. When it works, it works brilliantly, and the interplay between MC and DJ recalls early hip hop performances by artists like Grandmaster Flash, when the DJ controlled the music and the MC formatted his or her vocals around the DJ’s selection.

The 1998 *Hello Nasty* tour is also significant because it featured A Tribe Called Quest, who called it their farewell concert (although Tribe later reunited to play new shows in 2006). Tribe opened for the Beastie Boys, and then they brought Q-Tip back onstage to perform “Get It Together,” a song for which he contributed a guest verse on the *Ill Communication* album. Tip’s verse, in fact, is where that album’s title came from. The tour was advertised as “Beastie Boys in the Round” because the circular stage slowly rotated throughout the show, so that there was theoretically not a bad seat in the house. Mike D, MCA, and Ad-Rock sported orange jumpsuits and shifted between hip hop songs, instrumentals, and punk songs.

*Hello Nasty* continued the Beastie Boys’ connections with both the old and the new that have made them so adaptable. The Beasties re-emphasized their
connections to Native Tongues, with Ad-Rock and Mike D appearing on De La Soul’s “Squat.” And they looked to new producers. The “Body Movin’” remix by Fatboy Slim was the one they released as a single, rather than the album version. Mike D appeared on Handsome Boy Modeling School, a collaboration between producers Prince Paul and Dan the Automator. The B-Boys devoted new songs to correcting their earlier treatment of women in lyrics, a trend that began with “Sure Shot” on Ill Communication. In concert, they went back to playing Licensed to Ill songs, but often changing lyrics. On “Paul Revere” they changed a suggestive line about a “whiffle ball bat” to “Siamese cat.” After Hello Nasty, they released Sounds of Science: The Beastie Boys Anthology, which featured a picture of the Beastie Boys dressed as old men. They wrote extensive liner notes themselves, telling the history of the songs and offering a behind-the-scenes glimpse at their lives in the studio and on the road. Hello Nasty marked the final Tibetan Freedom Concert (in 2001) and the end of the Grand Royal era. The Grand Royal label folded and the magazine stopped production.

**TO THE 5 BOROUGHS**

The Beastie Boys’ 2005 album To the 5 Boroughs marked a return to their roots as their first all-hip hop album since Paul’s Boutique. There were no punk songs, no dub, and no guest stars: just the three Beastie Boys and Mixmaster Mike. They continued the New York focus of Hello Nasty, with Ad-Rock, Mike D, and MCA each living back in the city. The album is dedicated to that city, and they offer a tribute to New York on “An Open Letter to NYC,” which samples the Dead Boys punk rock classic “Sonic Reducer.” To the 5 Boroughs is the Beastie Boys’ most political recording, with “An Open Letter to NYC” addressing the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and other songs containing anti-Bush and antiwar sentiment: “We got a president we didn’t elect,” MCA rhymes on “Time to Build.” Such antiwar material was not new to the Beastie Boys. In the years between Licensed to Ill and Paul’s Boutique, they released a song called “I Want You for Desert Storm,” which commented on the first Gulf War. And in conjunction with the 1999 release of Sounds of Science: The Beastie Boys Anthology, they released a new single, “Alive,” in which Ad-Rock complained about the fact that his tax dollars were being used to build bombs.

With all the political commentary of To the 5 Boroughs, the Beastie Boys chose the upbeat “Ch-check It Out” as their first single. This song, through heavy MTV rotation, announced that the Beastie Boys were still here and still relevant. MCA maintains, “No, I didn’t retire.” The music video featured the Beastie Boys dressed in various costumes: as tourists, as Sir Stewart Wallace, and driving a fanboat through the Everglades. Up-and-coming producer Just Blaze created a remix of the track, for which the B-Boys recorded an alternate
video. In keeping with their focus on asserting their continuing relevance and importance to hip hop, Mike D complains that new MCs at Def Jam don’t recognize him. He borrows a line from Digital Underground’s Shock G to state, “I’m Mike D, the one that put the satin in your panties.” In 2005, hip hop was the biggest-selling music in the United States, and the most prominent music videos played on MTV and MTV2. Underground hip hop was making its way into video rotation, introducing viewers to a new breed of MCs and DJs that claimed to stay truer to the roots of old-school hip hop and contrasted with the late 1990s images of champagne parties and diamond necklaces that were so prominent in videos by Bad Boy artists such as P Diddy and Mase. Reaffirming their long-standing commitment to old-school and underground hip hop, the Beastie Boys invited underground MC and Native Tongues affiliate Talib Kweli to join their To the 5 Boroughs tour.

Onstage, the Beastie Boys abandoned the orange jumpsuits from their Hello Nasty tour and wore clothing similar to their Licensed to Ill days: cocked baseball caps, Adidas jumpsuits, and sneakers. Their “Triple Trouble” video, set in Times Square, featured this attire, as did their performance at The VH1 Hip-Hop Honors, where they performed “Right Right Now Now” and covered “Sucker M.C.’s” in a tribute to Run-DMC. This performance occurred less than one year after Run-DMC’s DJ Jam Master Jay was shot to death in a New York studio. At the end of the song, Ad-Rock said simply, “We love you, Jay,” and pointed his microphone at the two remaining members of the group that had worked so closely with the Beastie Boys at the beginning of their career.

THE LEGACY OF THE BEASTIE BOYS

The Beastie Boys have secured their place in hip hop by constantly reinventing the music while at the same time never neglecting the forms on which hip hop music was founded: rhymes, turntables, and beats. They began recording early enough to maintain a connection to old-school hip hop, and their early connections with the Def Jam label and the artists Run-DMC, Public Enemy, and Biz Markie, as well as their later connections with Native Tongues groups A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul, lend another level to their importance. When MTV awarded the Beastie Boys the coveted Video Vanguard Award, which honors an artist’s lifetime contribution to music video innovation, they had Public Enemy’s Chuck D present the honor. In hip hop, where artists acknowledge their predecessors and influences in lyrics, the Beastie Boys’ name is kept alive. Licensed to Ill has remained a commercial dynamo since its 1986 release, but in the late 1990s a rash of hip hop samples solidified the album’s place as a classic. Several of these samples came from one song, “The New Style,” from Licensed to Ill. In 1995 the Pharcyde released the song “Drop,” which took its title from the Ad-Rock vocal sample from “The New
Style” that the Pharcyde turned into their song’s hook. The “Drop” video was filmed in reverse motion, and two Beastie Boys appeared in the video, with Mike D riding a bicycle backward down the street and Ad-Rock posing for the camera. Dilated Peoples also sampled Ad-Rock’s “Mmm . . . Drop” and referenced the Beastie Boys in “Another Sound Mission” from their album 20/20. Tha Alkaholiks use this same sample from “The New Style” on Firewater (2006), and Redman recorded a cover of “The New Style” (renaming it “Beet Drop”) for his 1998 album Doc’s Da Name. Redman’s cover stripped the original to its final verse (the same verse sampled by Dilated Peoples, Tha Alkaholiks, and the Pharcyde), which Ad-Rock begins by screaming, “Let me clear my throat.” DJ Kool borrowed this line for his 1997 single “Let Me Clear My Throat.” Ad-Rock’s “New Style” verse, via its popularity in samples, has become one of the Beastie Boys’ most famous. They even sampled it themselves on “Intergalactic.” The popularity of this line and Ad-Rock’s recognizable voice solidified the Beastie Boys’ position in hip hop circles.

There are further Beastie Boys allusions in many other contemporary hip hop songs, such as Lil’ Kim’s “Hold It Now,” which incorporates music and lyrics from the Beastie Boys’ “Paul Revere” and “Hold It Now Hit It,” and samples MCA’s vocals. Lyrical references to the Beastie Boys extend to Eminem, who mentioned Mike D in lyrics and spoke openly about his admiration for the Beastie Boys. Kid Rock, whose career was given a boost by a spread in the B-Boys’ Grand Royal Magazine, also spoke openly about their influence and importance to his work. Within the new wave of 1990s white rap and rap-rock acts acknowledging their debts to the Beastie Boys, Insane Clown Posse owed them the greatest debt, as ICP’s vocal styles were developed in imitation of Ad-Rock’s nasal delivery. Although white groups like Young Black Teenagers and Lordz of Brooklyn had certainly borrowed B-Boy vocal styles before, ICP not only did not acknowledge the influence, but dissed the Beastie Boys in their lyrics: “Fuck the Beastie Boys and fuck the Dalai Lama.”

Even with their detractors, the Beastie Boys will always have a place in hip hop history. Their unique and eclectic blend of hip hop and other forms of music, their humor, and their energetic live performances have earned them the respect of hip hop luminaries and fans alike. In 2006, Yauch, under the name of Nathanial Hornblower, produced a film called Awesome: I . . . Shot That! He handed out fifty Hi-8 and digital video cameras to fans at a 2004 Beastie Boys concert at Madison Square Garden, and compiled the footage into a feature-length film in order to capture the concert experience from the fans; perspective. MCA, Ad-Rock, and Mike D performed in old-school green track suits and baseball caps with their rap names lettered across the front. They performed songs from each of their albums, from Licensed to Ill through To the 5 Boroughs, and Mixmaster Mike switched LPs and changed the beat at least once per song, prompting the B-Boys to rhyme over a mixture of old-school breakbeats like “Apache” and “900 Number” (aka “Ed Lover’s Theme”) and contemporary singles such as Jay-Z’s “Dirt Off Your
Shoulders” and Fabolous’s “Breathe.” Darryl “DMC” McDaniels was in the crowd, and Doug E. Fresh joined the Beastie Boys onstage to perform “Time to Get Ill.” Even while emphasizing their old-school connections, the Beastie Boys are always looking toward the future.

See Also: Run-DMC, Public Enemy, Eminem, Roxanne Shanté, Native Tongues, Grandmaster Flash

WORKS CITED


FURTHER RESOURCES


Grand Royal Magazine


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY


Licensed to Ill. Def Jam, 1986.


To the 5 Boroughs. Capitol, 2004

On March 1, 2006, the development of a hip hop exhibit at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, was announced in the *New York Times*. This exhibit would be the third nationally recognized effort in preserving hip hop at an institution; the Experience Music Project in Seattle and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland each had exhibits dedicated to hip hop. As is customary, many pioneers, trailblazers, and overall leaders of hip hop were asked to participate in these exhibits. One might expect Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, Crazy Legs, and Russell Simmons to make the curators’ lists. After all, they come from a select pool of innovators. When it comes to recognizing women leaders of the hip hop world, a small group is included almost every time. MC Lyte, a female rapper whose professional career has spanned almost two decades, is one of them.

Lyte’s career in hip hop includes roles as a folk scholar, artist, and keeper of the culture. Her writing (and performance) qualifies her as a scholar. Through storytelling and signifying, Lyte conveys messages that do more than rock a party. Her lyrics challenge listeners to think critically. Like other hip hop
icons, this rapper uses humor as a storytelling strategy to make broader commentaries on sociological issues that affect urban communities. Her courage as an artist is revealed in the ways she addresses gender, race, health, and spirituality. For instance, Lyte is one of the first rappers to integrate issues regarding HIV and abortion into her lyrical narratives. Other pioneer efforts include her mixed-genre collaborations, philanthropic endeavors, and media appearances, all of which helped to debunk stigmas attached to hip hop culture and rap music in particular.

IN THE BEGINNING

Before becoming MC Lyte, before having enough material for ten albums and additional greatest hits compilations, before being recognized as a trailblazer for male and female MCs, there was a girl maturing into a woman known to the world as Lana Moorer. Born in Queens on October 11, 1971, Lyte spent her youth in Brooklyn, attending Weusi Shule African elementary school in East Flatbush, a junior high school in the same neighborhood, and George W. Wingate high school. In an interview with Michael A. Gonzales, she identified junior high as her initial training ground for writing and performing rhymes. Thanks to family influences, Lyte immersed herself in music from the R&B sounds of Gladys Knight, Al Green, and James Brown and hip hop songs by Funky 4+1 More, the Treacherous Three, and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Older cousins introduced Lyte to the ways of the culture; between junior high and high school, Lyte become another self-taught MC, ready to work on her signature storytelling style (Gonzales, “Kickin’” 43).

In interviews, Lyte has admitted that she was not always an obedient daughter and diligent student (Gonzales “Kickin’”). However, she witnessed her mother’s hard work—bartending at night, taking classes during the day—and that seemed to affect her work ethic to some degree. By high school she had multiple part-time jobs in addition to being a full-time student. Though she and her friends attended clubs and concerts at Latin Quarter and Union Square, Lyte seemed to realize by her teenage years that she would need to work hard to make money.

Lyte did not let her side jobs or schooling distract her from the music. She listened to Mr. Magic’s and Red Alert’s show, which came on the New York radio station KISS FM. Music videos had just started appearing, and the daily show Video Music Box, conveniently scheduled for the 3:30 after-school slot, was another outlet for working MCs and DJs. While the format may have resembled previous shows like American Bandstand or Soul Train, Video Music Box had its own raw appeal with studio interviews, videotaped segments from parties, and the release of rap videos. Some might consider Video Music Box a predecessor of the glossier contemporary shows like Total Request Live and 106 & Park. Brooklyn producers (and creators) Ralph
McDaniels and Lionel Martin of *Video Music Box* definitely had the attention of young aspirants like Lyte, who practiced their MC skills daily. Being exposed to videos by Salt-N-Pepa, Sequence, Sha Rock, Roxanne Shanté, and the Real Roxanne, Lyte was ready to put her own rhymes on tape. Excited and interested in presenting her lyrics in a way that few others had done, she befriended Tony, a fellow Brooklyn dweller who had dreams of contributing to the music from the production end. Thanks to the equipment in his basement—microphone, turntables, and albums—he and Lyte put together her first single, “I Cram to Understand U (Sam).” Soon Lyte would find her own music videos on *Video Music Box*, starting with “Paper Thin” (Gonzales, “Kickin’” 44).

At some point during her high school years, Lyte began using her pseudonym, MC Lyte. While she seemed to have a growing network of friends who could help her lay down tracks, it was ultimately her extended family that assisted in transferring her rhymes from ink on paper to audio on vinyl. She began working with her stepbrother Milk and his brother Gizmo, who performed together as Audio Two. Milk described the advantages of his sister’s unique delivery: “Her voice reminded me of MC Shan. She was tough, which was good, because there were no other girls rapping like that” (Gonzales, “Kickin’” 45). Yet it was not just the timbre of Lyte’s voice that grabbed people’s attention. From this first song “Cram,” a saga that reveals a love-torn protagonist whose boyfriend chooses the crack pipe over her love, Lyte’s interest in addressing drugs and other serious matters was quite evident.

Milk and Gizmo, known for their trademark song “Top Billin’,” helped Lyte pick beats for her rhymes. Audio Two’s “Top Billin’” was a rap classic long before the single’s official release in 1990 (Lyte would record a live version of “Top Billin’” with Gizmo years later on the album *Seven & Seven*). With the early assistance of her brothers, Lyte also had the financial support of Milk and Gizmo’s father, Nat Robinson. An entrepreneur in his own right, Robinson started the First Priority music label to invest in their careers. Becoming a father figure for Lyte, Robinson arranged road trips for the young performers. The artists toured with Heavy D, Kool Moe Dee, Queen Latifah, and Ice-T. Lyte gained professional experience being on the road, behind the microphone, and on the stage in places like the Latin Quarter where she had ventured as a concertgoer with school friends. She found herself part of a growing First Priority family, which included Audio Two and Alliance (headed by King of Chill), people she had spent time creating music with anyway.

No matter the music genre, record labels are known for signing artists of kith and kin. First Priority is no different. Before Lyte recorded her first album, she gained performing experience from being in the public domain with other members of her label family. Similar to jazz musicians allowing guests to sit in on jam sessions, the First Priority artists moved as a unit. Robinson proved his business acumen when he accomplished a feat that no other independent music label of its kind had achieved until then. In 1986 he
signed a deal with Atlantic Records, due in part to the foresight of Sylvia Rhone (now CEO of Elektra). Afterward, distribution became less of a challenge and Lyte had a broader stage from which to be heard. With the support of her music label and parent company, Lyte went on to complete four albums, a thirteen-year commitment that turned out to be only one chapter in the rapper’s long career.

Labels like First Priority, Tommy Boy, Def Jam, Bad Boy, So So Def, Death Row, and Roc-A-Fella have undergone significant changes, being resold, re-distributed, or just plain recycled. Still, one need only listen to the early music of these labels to understand the allegiance between artist and label family. Artists acknowledge their producers, DJs, fellow rap crews, and other collaborators as a way of legitimizing the aesthetic and their roles in it. While some may consider this form of self-aggrandizement to be simply a marketing strategy, these shout-outs are also affirmations, nods to the professional contributors who keep the culture and the music moving.

Regarding her experiences with the First Priority family, Lyte recently said, “I had a great beginning with [them]. It was all about the talent. It was all about what I wanted to put forth in the music. It was all about me staying true to who I really was, and I guess because I had that foundation I was able to set the standard for what was acceptable for me” (Bostick). The label’s 2005 release *Basement Flavor* features eleven tracks from its original music family, including Audio Two, MC Lyte, Positive K, L.A. Luv, DJ Soul Shock, See-Que, Alliance, King of Chill, and the Canadian artist Michie Mee (see sidebar: *Hip Hop in Canada*).

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**Hip Hop in Canada**

*Robin Chamberlain*

Although hip hop developed much more slowly in Canada than in the United States, it has produced, and continues to produce, some of the most exciting and innovative music in the scene. The first Canadian rap single to break into the Top 40 was Maestro’s “Let Your Backbone Slide” in 1989, which is still the best-selling Canadian hip hop single of all time. Along with Maestro, icons of the early era included Devon, Dream Warriors, and Kish. Another icon, Michie Mee, became the first Canadian hip hop artist to sign a deal with an American record label, First Priority. Additionally, Michie Mee was the only hip hop artist to appear on the Canadian pop charts between 1991 and 1998—and then largely because of her collaboration with the hard rock band Reggadeath.

It was not until 1996, however, that Canadian hip hop garnered the momentum it continues to enjoy today. This was the result of several key events, beginning with the creation of the UMAC (Urban Music Association of Canada) to promote Canadian hip hop both domestically and internationally. In 1997, Dubmatique of Montreal became the first hip hop band to make it onto the francophone pop charts. Finally, in 1998, Rascalz, a Vancouver band,
recorded “Northern Touch,” arguably the most important song in the history of Canadian hip hop. Their album Cash Crop won a juno for the best rap recording that year, but the band refused it because it was presented in the nontelevised portion of the ceremony. In 1999, the award was moved to the main ceremony, in which Rascalz accepted it and performed “Northern Touch” live. This corresponded with unprecedented attention being paid to other Canadian hip hop and trip-hop artists, including Esthero and Choclair. Finally, in 2001, CFXJ (Flow 93.5) became Canada's first urban music station. Many similar stations followed, creating radio venues for Canadian hip hop artists. Artists like K-OS, Swollen Members, and Nelly Furtado emerged as major players in this vibrant new hip hop scene.

These innovations ushered in a new era for Canadian hip hop, marked not only by mainstream successes but also by exciting innovations by independent and experimental artists, including Buck 65 and Sixtoo, both of whom hail from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Both Buck 65 and Sixtoo were a part of the Anticon collective. Although based in Oakland, California, Anticon played an important role in the Canadian hip hop underground by supporting innovative artists like Buck 65. What makes artists like these interesting is their willingness to look outside of the traditional content for hip hop songs, while still maintaining a strong allegiance to the icons they name as influences. Buck 65’s more recent albums, for example, increasingly show the influence of jazz, blues, and electronica on his particular brand of hip hop. Sixtoo, meanwhile, showcases a range of talents: While best known for his stellar production skills, he is also an accomplished MC, turntablist, and graffiti artist. While mainstream Canadian hip hop has produced a welter of talented artists, the future of hip hop in Canada lies in its dynamic underground scene.

TEXTUAL STRATEGIES

Storytelling and signifying are the two lyrical strategies that distinguish MC Lyte as a hip hop icon (see sidebar: The Art of Storytelling). First, the particular ways in which Lyte delivers stories are significant. While some of her songs are more lighthearted than others, Lyte generally uses her music as a tool for self-aggrandizement, to warn people to step back. In this she does not differ from many of her peers. However, her use of storytelling makes her music distinctive. Note the basic creative writing formula:

Author → Narrator/Protagonist → Conflict → Crisis → Resolution

As her album credits repeatedly indicate, MC Lyte writes the majority of her rhymes. Her songs that follow story structures all have narrators; some of these narrators even double as protagonists. MC Lyte does this by employing the first person (“I”) point of view. Most rappers follow the same
Several of MC Lyte’s songs present narrative scenarios with conflicts, crises, and resolutions. Her first three albums have numerous cuts that not only tell stories but provide moral endings as well: “I Cram to Understand U (Sam),” “Cappuccino,” “Eyes Are the Soul,” “Poor Georgie,” and “Lola from the Copa.” Since early MCs generally used freestyle rhymes rather than structured stories when performing at parties, only a handful of rap artists consistently rhymed in story style before Lyte’s debut.


Female MCs also experimented with narrative rap. Nikki D’s “Daddy’s Little Girl” is a cautionary tale about a teenage girl caught in a scenario of unplanned pregnancy. U.T.F.O.’s “Roxanne, Roxanne” takes a different turn, although it does involve the relationships between young men and women. “Roxanne, Roxanne” shows the members of U.T.F.O. touting themselves as plausible catches. Roxanne, the object of their affection, comes off as foolish for not choosing any of them.

Yet Slick Rick serves as the most prominent example of an MC Lyte predecessor who rhymed in story style. He was on the scene years before the production of his first album in 1988. His performance with Doug E. Fresh in “The Show” (1985) only helped his reputation for spitting witty rhymes with his British accent. The Great Adventures of Slick Rick appeared the same year that Lyte as a Rock was released. “Children’s Story” and “Hey Young World” feature bull-headed adolescents with premature demises. Slick Rick’s voice serves as the wise narrator, a veritable Dr. Seuss who makes his audience feel smart by not preaching morals to them.

MC Lyte contributed to this new style of rap music, one that had been underutilized. Her aesthetic belongs to a subgenre of rap in which social criticism is the goal and fictitious stories are the methodology. Lyte does what Vernon Reid described as “[translating] experiences we call emotion by expressing inexpressible things” (Goldman 139). Reid, a guitarist with the group Living Colour, a producer, and co founder of Black Coalition (a group of rock artists who do not confine their songs to those that are funky or soulful), encourages artists to present their music in different mediums, void of
Lyte’s high-content songs, therefore, are more about the characters and their lessons than they are about the lyrical prowess of the rapper. Take three of her early songs for example: “I Cram to Understand U (Sam),” “Cappuccino,” and “Poor Georgie.” In “Cram,” the narrator struggles for Sam’s attention and affection, yet this desire is never realized. Sam’s personal cravings conflict with those of the narrator. So even though the song is about the narrator’s interactions with Sam, it is also about Sam’s tragic flaw. Listeners do not get lost in the angst of the teenage girl; instead, they find out the truth about Sam, a man strung out on crack and unable to put the narrator first. Thus, this song created by a teenage rapper allows listeners to access it on many levels—from the perspective of young love, of drug abuse, and of living in a world where both fight to exist.

Lyte laments her luck in “Cappuccino.” The narrator hears about a café that sells the best cappuccino. She goes there to try it, only to discover her bad timing as the police raid the café for its illegal drug trafficking. By a twist of fate, the narrator is shot and enters a dream state. There she reunites with people who have died from drug abuse, car accidents, gun violence, and other foul circumstances. When she regains consciousness, she decides that the drink is not for her. The coffee may serve as a lyrical metaphor: an addiction, even to coffee, can be dangerous.

“Poor Georgie” serves as another example of Lyte’s subtle messages. The narrator explains that when she met George he was instantly smitten and wanted to date her. She is drawn to him despite his player status. Soon, the audience gets the conflict. George is in trouble. He is diagnosed with lung and colon cancer. After a series of events, George has a fatal car accident. By the narrator’s tone, one cannot be sure whether George’s crash was intentional or not. After this crisis, the narrator contemplates the story. In the resolution, Lyte provides the moral: Cherish people every day and make sure they know that you do. Her tales are not vignettes designed to
entertain; they are thought-provoking rhymes that arouse audiences to action, not apathy.

Lyte has a way of signifying that gives her a trademark as well. Most, if not all, rappers signify, but few do it as eloquently as Lyte. She roasts both her male and female opponents and triumphs through the ordeal as the survivor. Lyte dedicates at least three songs on each album to proving her credentials. While the song “I Am Woman” is on her debut album (*Lyte as a Rock*, 1988), she does not play the “I’m a girl so love me” card. She appeals to different audiences by integrating universal themes into the music. Most people can relate to the desire to be the best and achieve great success. Songs like “Playgirls Play,” “My Time,” “Ride Wit Me,” “Beyond the Hype,” and “I Am the Lyte” convey her competitive nature.

“Cha, Cha, Cha” is an early example of her competing not as a female MC, but as an MC. In this song, she includes the audience as part of her battle strategy. Unlike some of her other songs in which she attacks a rapper or a crew of rappers, this song is a general warning to her competition. Considered an ultimate dis song, Lyte references hip hop and lyricism as if it is a science, a complex skill that few have mastered. The song does not have violent images, yet delivers punishment. The defeat for competitors is in the realization that they are not smart enough to outwit her.

On her early albums, songs like “I Am the Lyte” show her skills and those of DJ K-Rock, her noted DJ on her first few albums. On the live version of “Top Billin’” that she records with Milk D, Lyte positions herself as the ultimate lyricist in tandem with the First Priority family, especially her DJ and Audio Two. She may boast about her abilities, but she does not showboat to stand apart from those who contribute to her success. Lyte’s participation in the Roxanne Wars also shows her signifying skills. The first Roxanne battle began in 1984 when the Untouchable Force Organization (U.T.F.O.) recorded “Roxanne, Roxanne.” This boy-chases-girl song is about Roxanne, the new, most attractive girl in the neighborhood. The three members of U.T.F.O. share verses in the song while the fictitious Roxanne remains silent. Fortunately, a young teenage lyricist named Lolita Shante’ Gooden, aka Roxanne Shante’, responded to U.T.F.O. by recording “Roxanne’s Revenge” later that year.

Using the same music track as U.T.F.O.’s “Roxanne, Roxanne,” Shante’s single had original lyrics. It is estimated that this young MC from Queensbridge, New York, sold over a quarter of a million copies in the tristate area alone before U.T.F.O. brought a lawsuit against her for copyright infringement (Dennis). If Shante’s song frustrated U.T.F.O., it agitated female MCs even more. After “Roxanne’s Revenge,” female MCs began creating answer records to take their own shots at U.T.F.O. and to upstage female MC rivals, especially Shante. In an interview with Sacha Jenkins years later, Shante reflected on how her song opened the door to mass ridicule: “Every female rapper who came out felt like they had this Shante thing to prove. If someone
didn’t know what to make a record about, they would make it about Roxanne Shanté” (26). Sparky D’s and the Real Roxanne’s songs were only a few in the dozens of recorded Roxanne records. What writers Sacha Jenkins and Reginald Dennis have called “the longest-running series of answer records in the annals of hip-hop” is hard to corroborate, considering that many of the songs are no longer extant. However, both Jenkins (23) and Dennis say that approximately 100 songs were released from different female MCs, all wanting to be the true Roxanne.

Conversely, U.T.F.O. was not the only group engaged in response record battles. Salt-N-Pepa’s “The Show Stopper” (1986) was done in response to Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh’s “The Show” (1985). Male rappers singing their own praise served in part as the catalyst for female rap criticism. Starting as one MC outwitting another, the response record trend evolved into something else. The Roxanne Wars signified women wanting to assert their own identities and claim spaces in a world where male MCs had already found creative refuge.

Perhaps MC Lyte’s battle with Antoinette (aka the Gangstress) added to the tradition of these wars. Whether this is true or not, Lyte found a unique way of making her response songs more than fallacious appeals. Many rappers fall into the trap of ad hominem attacks, the practice of attacking a person’s character as opposed to the content of her argument. Lyte commits this fallacy, but she extends her position by also attacking her opponent’s arguments point by point. As she explained to Michael Gonzales, Lyte recorded the song out of respect for Audio Two, whom Antoinette allegedly dissed during a radio interview (“Kickin’ 47). Audio Two’s Milk and Gizmo, Gonzales notes, did not want to respond by creating a song that dissed a female MC, but Lyte was willing to do “10% Dis” on her debut album Lyte as a Rock in their defense (46). During the hook of the song, a group of hecklers jeer Antoinette in unison, calling her a fake and a beat stealer. MC Lyte attacks in each verse, calling her everything from a liar to a cheat to a thief to a ho. In addition to these insults, Lyte explains why she is the bigger and better MC.

Things unraveled even further when Antoinette recorded “Lights Out” in response. Antoinette denounced MC Lyte from start to finish, calling her a ho, a bitch, part of a wick-wack crew, and hooked on the crack pipe. Similar to the jeering in “10% Dis,” Antoinette uses a crowd in “Lights Out.” Her crowd chants that Lyte’s career, reign, and audience appeal are over. Neither rapper physically retaliated in response to public accusations, but they did attempt to verbally demolish each other’s livelihoods. This too speaks to Lyte’s class as a rapper. Lyte chose to keep the battles on vinyl despite how ugly things became.

Lyte’s 1989 sophomore album Eyes on This has another response song for Antoinette called “Shut the Eff Up! (Hoe).” A sample of 1970s R&B singer Millie Jackson starts the song: “I think it’s time I start feeling bitchy.” Antoinette did not formally respond, but Lyte did become a target of other verbal
abuse. In 1992, Roxanne Shanté attacked MC Lyte on “Big Mama.” Lyte responded with “Steady F**king” on her fourth album, *Ain’t No Other* (1993). Lyte’s song samples KRS-One’s “Criminal Minded” (1987), in which KRS describes Shanté as being good for nothing but sex. In all of her battle songs, Lyte defends the integrity of MCs by identifying true MCs as those who rap from reservoirs of knowledge. While she does engage in name calling quite a bit, MC Lyte uses rap as more than an outlet for degrading verbal arguments.

**WOMANHOOD**

One of MC Lyte’s biggest contributions to hip hop is her social commentary on the lives of women and men. Just as Salt-N-Pepa and other female MCs had done before her, Lyte expresses her opinions regarding sensuality, sexuality, love, and relationships. The subtle difference is that Lyte’s love songs have multiple layers: The songs are usually addressed to women and men; the characters include both genders in romantic situations; and most important, the songs provide deeper understandings of interconnected relationships that allow men to be men and women to be women.

The song “When in Love” works as one of MC Lyte’s love anthems. Reminiscent of a piece that Aretha Franklin might have composed, an R&B soprano songstress emphasizes the word *crazy* in the refrain of the song. *Crazy* seems to serve as a euphemism for those who are strung out (or who have been strung out) on love. Washing clothes, picking your lover’s nose, letting him or her drive your car, or waiting for your lover to call—these actions suggest the effect love has on people. The song shows regular people doing regular things. Perhaps this is why Lyte has been referred to as a “Hip-Hop Zora Neale Hurston” (Gonzales, “Kickin’” 48). Like Hurston, Lyte celebrates black folk for what they are while revealing the beauty and absurdity of their lives. In the widely read novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, readers discover how the protagonist Janie endures many relationships before discovering true self-love and love for another man. Lyte’s “When in Love” challenges listeners to redirect their energy, to invest time in themselves and those who truly love them, not simply those who find them attractive.

Her 1993 hit “Ruffneck” may sound crude—with Lyte’s voice at its raspiest and the song’s content at its grittiest—but it is rather tender. Filled with street imagery and crass behaviors, “Ruffneck” is a piece about respecting brothers for their social and emotional intelligence. The narrator does not applaud men who are law-abiding, polite, and gentle. Instead, she enthusiastically acknowledges men who live and die by the codes of street life. In graphic detail, the narrator announces her desire for a lover who is aggressive in the street, in her company, and in the bedroom. Love exists there, a love for who the man is and who he is not. While some may consider this an anthem for tough guys, it is
also an anthem for the women that stay with and put up with the men. Lyte had rapped a gentler version of this theme with Sinead O’Connor in “I Want Your Hands on Me.” As Katrina Irving explains, “[‘Hands’] is an extremely effective political rap, one that stresses the importance both of constructing different modes of subjectivity for women and of an equivalence building” (117). “Ruffneck” has similar qualities in that it empowers the female protagonist to claim affection instead of passively receiving it.

Lyte earned a Grammy nomination for “Ruffneck,” which is arguably her grittiest song, stuck between the previous era of socially conscious hits by Queen Latifah and a more sexually liberated era of sexually explicit songs by Lil’ Kim. By the time Lyte won a Soul Train Award for “Keep n, Keepin’ n” with R&B group Xscape in 1996 (Lyte’s second gold single), Queen Latifah had earned a gold album for Black Reign and Da Brat’s Funkdafied album had gone platinum, the first solo female rapper to do so. Lyte’s “Cold Rock a Party” in collaboration with producer Sean Combs earned her another gold single in 1997. The Bad Boy record label had approximately a half-dozen gold singles that year, not including the platinum albums or other collaborations.

Lyte had to contend with a rap world that was becoming much more obscene and graphic. Somehow, she managed to keep love, loyalty, and commitment as central themes in her love songs. She did this without making the songs too sensitive. Cuts from her more recent albums—“U Got It,” “Where Home Is,” “Maybe I Deserve,” and “It’s All Yours”—have their own sultry style of conveying the importance of love. She continues to work toward positive public images of black women and men. She once reflected on her career and position as a role model for others: “I think I speak for generations of women who aren’t afraid to take responsibility. [Those] who identify with strength and courage and independence. And hopefully I’ve sparked a whole lot of women to be able to speak for themselves and stand for what it is they believe in” (Gonzales, “Kickin’” 49). Her music videos convey these interests in promoting intelligent, respectful images of women. From her first video “Paper Thin,” where she is fully clothed in a sweatsuit, turtle neck, jacket, and boots, Lyte seemed more concerned with the delivery of her art than any ill modification of her body.

**MUSIC VIDEOS**

The music video for “Paper Thin” starts with two red Volkswagen Jetta pulling up to a subway station. Lyte jumps out of one car and yells to her crew that she wants to take the subway. One of her friends escorts her. As soon as they get on a crowded train car, Lyte spots a guy engaged in intimate conversation with two women. From the way she looks at him, it seems that she is dating the guy. The audience can infer her disappointment. The intercom beeps. The doors close. The train moves, and Lyte begins rapping:
“When you say you love me, it doesn’t matter.” The subway train serves as Lyte’s stage; the riders are her audience. A man with a guitar, another with an oversized portable radio, and a third with a mini-set of drums accompany her as she hurls lyrical insults at the guy who is caught in the act.

Like other videos in the late 1980s, Lyte’s use of the subway station and the actual train suggest her affection for the environment from which she came. There is nothing glossy about the video set, which is indeed a subway station. Dirty stairs and subway platforms, graffiti walls, haggard subway riders, coated windows, and unpolished stainless steel poles all add texture to the video. However, the video is part of the natural elements of the underground, not the other way around. The use of subway trains in early rap videos should not be overlooked. More than just a low-budget decision, video directors who had some, if not a lot of, input from rap artists tapped into a train metaphor whose meaning may have changed, but whose aesthetic traditions stayed intact. Twentieth-century rap videos were not the first to use trains. Black visual artists from the Reconstruction period forward have used trains as an artistic symbol of change. Visual artist Romare Bearden (1911-1988), for instance, is known for incorporating locomotives into his paintings, watercolors, collages, and murals. The train is said to impart several meanings: the migration patterns of African Americans moving from south to north, the upward mobility of an oppressed people, and the overall promise of a better future. The video “Paper Thin” is postmodern in the way that it contributes to hip hop culture, where subways indicate the music’s origins (even borough specific), the audience’s originality, the art’s potency, and the rapper’s resolve despite limited resources and bleak surroundings.

“Cappuccino” is another one of Lyte’s videos in which movement through the urban streets is essential to the storyline and video plot. The video follows the song pretty closely, taking viewers to the café, to heaven, to Lyte waking up in her bed from a bad dream (even in bed, she arises in a business suit), and then back to the café. A black man in a white suit with dark sunglasses seems to represent an angel of sorts, especially since he appears and dissolves just as quickly. This angel stays with the protagonist through many of the scenes. In the end when she refuses the cappuccino and accepts the pink flower from the angel (who looks remarkably like KRS-One), viewers are left to discern the moral choice of coffee or no coffee, drugs or no drugs. Lyte drives off at the end of the video in a black luxury convertible with a red leather interior. She yells, “Leave them drugs alone!” The camera pans out to show the late-day sunlight hitting the brick stone buildings. Like “Paper Thin,” this video has many visual elements that suggest homage to the culture. Hip hop itself is likened to a funny valentine, one with unconventional beauty but undeniable appeal.

“Everyday” is a lighthearted video that shows a different side of MC Lyte. In the song, a man romantically involved with Lyte cleans the house, the pool, and the grounds, all in anticipation of his woman’s homecoming. These shots
are intercut with segments of Lyte eating out, driving around, playing tennis, and enjoying the spa with her girlfriends. “I demand my respect,” the words in Lyte’s song play as the camera cuts to the man placing flowers in a vase by the floor-to-ceiling kitchen windows. By the end of the video, the guy is happy to see Lyte even though he is visibly exhausted from putting the house back together. While he may have enjoyed being in the house alone while Lyte was away, he had no intention of letting her see the place in such dishevelment. Clearly, the gender roles are reversed here, a common theme in Lyte’s videos.

Usually wearing gold hoop earrings and modest gold chains, Lyte remains fully dressed in her videos. She is either in jerseys and jeans, sweatsuits, or tastefully fitted business suits. Her appearance is reiterated with her video characterizations. These roles usually portray her in powerful positions. Lyte’s videos are a rarity in a time when the trend is to show scantily clad, hypersexualized women dancing lasciviously for the entertainment of the viewer, who is generally expected to be male, horny, and heterosexual. Even when the video’s singer and protagonist is a woman, objectifying images far outweigh empowering ones.

Lyte works against such sexist debauchery in her videos. In “I Go On” she raps behind a business desk as if the viewer is a business client. In “Ruffneck” the women are the gazers behind the camera, scrutinizing the men and comparing notes with each other in a loft apartment and on the rooftop of a building. In “Stop, Look, & Listen” a simulated live concert shows Lyte and her all-male musicians and dancers in suits. The dancers do the suggestive routines. Lyte sticks to the music. In “Cold Rock a Party” the same holds true. Lyte raps. The impromptu party in the elevator continues and she stays tastefully engaged in the fun. The highest degree of dancing occurs in “When in Love.” Between vignettes that follow the song’s verses, Lyte and others are shown wearing brightly colored sport clothes. Their performances combine modern dance and hip hop moves. Dance was being popularized through videos, movies, and television shows. Recall the fly girl dance routines during the opening credits of In Living Colour, The Arsenio Hall Show, and Living Single, as well as sorority and fraternity steppers on A Different World.

MC Lyte conveys her most empowering images in “Stop, Look, & Listen” and “Lyte as a Rock.” At the start of “Stop, Look, & Listen,” viewers see Lyte deplaning and riding off in a limousine. Her promotional managers review the itinerary with her during the ride to the concert hall: She has a public service announcement to do for the Children’s Defense Fund; her appearance on Arsenio Hall will air that night; she has to complete interviews with Newsweek magazine and Rolling Stone in the week to come. No sooner do they get to the concert space than the camera cuts to an anxious crowd who chant, “We want Lyte!” She has not even begun to perform yet, and already the images suggest her autonomy, popularity, and professional demands. In contrast to other videos where women are dancing as extras or
walking down the street as moving props, Lyte is in control of her situation and body image, thereby altering audience reception.

“Lyte as a Rock” is a highly intellectual music video. It starts with words in white letters scrolling up a black screen, like the prologue to *Star Wars* (1977). The video’s words read, in part: “Lyte is Here—No One / Can Stop Me!!!” The video then begins. A young girl holding a little black baby doll entertains herself by observing several skits that it seems she is imagining. The first skit shows Lyte dressed like a cave woman. Perhaps the suggestion is that the rapper’s influence spans centuries, not just decades. The second skit shows Lyte dressed as an Egyptian queen. There are pyramids, fire pits, servants to fan her as she raps, male escorts to carry her away, and females to adore (or hate) her. The video then transitions to the third skit where Lyte is likened to a powerful Mafia-like boss, suit, hat, and sneering thugs to match. As she raps, she intimidates the opposing mob leader, who is also a woman.

The last two skits are educational. In the fourth, the camera cuts to a poster of Malcolm X holding a gun and looking out a window. The words “By Any Means Necessary” are written in bold black letters. Viewers see Lyte and her crew wearing fatigues. She is in a red T-shirt and wears a leather medallion that has an imprint of the African continent. At first it appears as though Lyte is in prison behind bars, yet as her rhyme continues, viewers realize that she is locking up the competition. Once again, she remains in control and in the lead. The last skit shows a group of young people in a mock classroom setting. The chalkboard has two words: “Metaphor” and “Simile.” Two men are explaining how Lyte’s name qualifies as examples of both terms on the chalkboard. Then everyone gets up and grooves. The camera pans away until the little girl in the beginning of the video returns. She waves goodbye to all of her imaginary friends. One may infer that Lyte understands the critical positioning of hip hop culture and rap music in particular. The young girl may signify the promise of things to come. The historical images suggest the legacy upon which hip hop stands. Lyte positions herself as the current torch bearer, conscious of her political role as lyricist.

Robin Roberts references Queen Latifah and Monie Love’s video “Ladies First” as the most politically charged video, especially for women. “Ladies First” has pictures of Madame C. J. Walker (millionaire cosmetic manufacturer); Sojourner Truth (famous public speaker for abolition and women’s rights, self-educated despite being enslaved); Angela Davis (writer, educator, and activist, especially against the oppression of women); Winnie Mandela (politician and key proponent of the African National Congress during Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment); Harriet Tubman (escaped slave who helped hundreds of others escape through a dozen return trips on the Underground Railroad); and Cicely Tyson (seasoned actress who once played Tubman in *A Woman Called Moses*). Roberts applauds Queen Latifah for working with her producers and colleagues to create positive images that legitimize her as an agent.
Lyte falls into this same category of positive interpretation. Like Queen Latifah, Lyte subverts traditional methods of presentation and makes herself look successful, smart, and sophisticated, void of gyrations and dimwitted expressions. Her references to Malcolm X suggest knowledge of both activism and pacifism. Malcolm X’s orations repeatedly focused on autonomy and community independence. Lyte repeats this theme in several of her songs. Strong men and women contribute to a stronger society. Her songs and videos reflect such a notion.

COMMUNITY HEALTH

Just as Lyte is conscious of the ways in which she portrays herself, her music reflects an intense interest in community survival. MC Lyte’s songs praise urban communities, especially the New York borough in which she spent most of her adolescence. On her first single, “Cram,” she mentions a roller disco near Empire Boulevard—the place where her protagonist meets the fictitious Sam. It isn’t that Brooklyn defines her, but it seems to have a strong influence in informing her worldview. “Kickin’ 4 Brooklyn” and “Brooklyn” are entire songs dedicated to the borough. Lyte sends shout-outs, accompanied by K-Rock’s scratches and clap beats.

She shows her familial connections not just to her kin and her record label, but also to her community. Others like Big Daddy Kane, Busta Rhymes, and Biggie Smalls claim Brooklyn as their native turf. This practice of allegiance holds true for national and international rappers—Ice Cube (Los Angeles), KRS-One (South Bronx), Master P (New Orleans), Three 6 Mafia (Memphis), Common (Chicago), Lauryn Hill (South Orange), TI (Atlanta), IAM (Marseille, France), and Prophets of Da City (Cape Town, South Africa), to name a few. Lyte participates in the tradition of naming and claiming her space. Since “Kickin’ 4 Brooklyn” on her debut album, Lyte has included references to Brooklyn in at least one song on each of her albums that followed.

One might mislabel Lyte as a standard rapper who repeatedly announces her hometown affiliation. However, Lyte does more than name drop; she uses Brooklyn as the setting for many of her lyrical stories. This tradition is reminiscent of previous black literary writers who used national and international locations to explain the plight of black and Latino protagonists, situations that seemed to have pan-African relevance, a common shared experience despite world boundaries. Just as Harlem, Senegal, Guinea, Spain, Italy, Russia, and other areas inspired writer Langston Hughes, or France gave James Baldwin new perspective, or Eatonville, Florida, revealed anthropological secrets to Zora Neale Hurston, and Chicago, Illinois, served as the muse for Gwendolyn Brooks, MC Lyte remains true to the rousing world of Brooklyn.
Lyte recognizes that people enliven spaces. Urban neighborhoods are her backdrops, canvases filled with colorful settings in which her characters roam. How different is Lyte’s artwork from the murals done by Romare Bearden or the films directed by Spike Lee? Lyricists like Lyte strive to make stories as riveting and visual as other art forms. People, with all of their triumphs and tragedies, become her artwork. Songs like “Lola from the Copa,” in which a young woman contracts HIV after a one-night stand, show the characters’ frustration, isolation, and ill-fated situations. “Drug Lord Superstar,” “Two Seater,” and “King of Rock” are other songs with similar antidrugs, antidisease, and antiviolence themes. Lyte uses narrators and characters to disagree with the drug lifestyle. To be cool is to ride with her, and to ride with Lyte’s alter egos is not to do drugs.

“Eyes Are the Soul,” from her Act Like You Know album, has similar caveats about personal health issues. All three verses provide different montages. The first verse describes a man infected by HIV from sharing drug needles and having unprotected sex. A controversial and almost unspeakable subject for 1991, this song predates the Grammy Award-winning song “Waterfalls” by TLC (1995), which promotes a similar message. Verse two of “Eyes” highlights a nineteen-year-old who goes from crack to outer space, thinking he can do things that he cannot do. From accidentally killing his mother to robbing grocery stores, he does not know fantasy from reality. Verse three describes a young girl who must choose between having a baby or an abortion. “Eyes” is arranged with jazz instrumentals. The trumpets and percussion add the contrast of chaotic coolness; a smoky layer masks the tragedies.

The communities in some of Lyte’s songs are in grave danger; the causes and effects, she suggests, threaten youth. While some may think Lyte focuses on the crime-ridden, drug-infested, and health-deprived areas of urban life, she is actually doing the opposite. Her music suggests that people do both positive and negative things. There is no monolithic group in the urban environment, or any other place for that matter. Furthermore, one may infer Lyte’s insistence that no young person is beyond guidance and support. Aside from the bad influences, Lyte shows her affection for her community, ever careful to note that some are not representatives of all.

Lyte’s songs are not morbid nor are the themes focused on guns, violence, and desperation. On the contrary, her music is legendary because it shows the flip side, the side where people, contrary to popular belief, do not want to live in hectic, unsafe, and unclean environments. Lyte’s commitment to community is evident through her verses. Characters like Sam from “Cram” or George from “Poor Georgie” or those in “Eyes Are the Soul” may be called sour apples, yet Lyte is not one to discard those who have made major missteps. Her narrators suggest partial blame should go to the toxic environments from which the characters come. She brings light to the forgotten, the abused, the isolated, and the marginalized. It is as if she is saying, “I love
my people—all of my people—not just the sane, healthy, and safe ones.” Her narrators show compassion for everyone, especially the ones in the most troubled situations. Her groundbreaking songs arm listeners with new tools for moral discernment.

In addition to helping community through her songs, Lyte has been involved in campaigns like Rock the Vote and antiviolence initiatives since the start of her career. When it was clear that violent incidents were beginning to plague neighborhood hip hop parties, concerts, and clubs, Lyte joined forces with KRS-One and others in the Stop the Violence Movement. KRS-One’s 1989 “Self-Destruction” single and music video had themes that coincided with Lyte’s lyrical messages. Artists donated their time to participate in the event, and proceeds from the single were donated to the National Urban League. Often referred to as a compilation of rap all-stars, the track included Public Enemy, Red Alert, Daddy O, Heavy D, KRS-One, Miss Melodie, LL Cool J, Lyte, and others (allhiphop.com). This assembly of artists resembled the “We Are the World” song and video event of 1985. “We Are the World,” an effort to raise funds for medical research in Africa, involved music artists from many genres, especially the cowriters of the song, Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie, and the producer Quincy Jones.

However, hip hop artists were not a part of that event. Still, KRS-One and other hip hop leaders made their own public statement. By assembling as positive-minded artists attacking violence in urban communities across the nation, they made their own landmark moment. Lyte’s involvement with “Self-Destruction” showed her early philanthropic inclinations, something she continues to fulfill.

People should consider Lyte a hip hop icon for the ways in which she mentors the next generation. Several projects help her achieve this end. She is cofounder of the Let Your Light Shine Youth Foundation, along with Yolanda Whitaker (YoYo). As stated on their official Web site, “the LYLSYF focuses on education, academic acceleration, and extracurricular activities.” Their mission statement also includes the objective to raise charity and scholarship funds for Los Angeles youth.

Lyte recently self-published Just My Take. In her 2005 interview with Octavia Bostick of www.allhiphop.com, Lyte described the book as words of inspiration for younger audiences and discussed the challenges of self-publishing. Lyte joins other female MCs who turned to writing books, namely Queen Latifah (Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman) and Sister Souljah (Coldest Winter Ever and No Disrespect). Lyte also continues to be an active contributor in the “Take Back the Music” initiative, a call to action that addresses “the visual and lyrical depiction of black women in Hip-hop videos and culture” (Johnson). She took part in the campaign’s first town hall meeting in February 2005, cohosted by Spelman College and Essence Magazine. Months later, she served as one of the Berklee College of Music
contest submission reviewers (along with other recording artists, DJs, and faculty members). Lyte discussed her responsibility as a woman in the music industry. In “Said: MC Lyte,” an interview with Joan Morgan, Lyte challenged people to be responsible for each other: “You have to teach a younger generation of women about self-respect and self-esteem. They can separate themselves from what they see and hear on television and radio. And they have to see enough variety in the types of portrayals of women to know they have a choice.”

From Lyte’s first album onward, several of her songs have dealt with difficult issues. Her contribution to “Self-Destruction” affirmed the work she was already doing through her music for others. She used the power of the pen to fight battles against not only MCs but also grave issues like poverty, disease, drugs, violence, unemployment, and injustice that plague urban communities. Lyte plays a significant role in hip hop since her work mainly adheres to critical issues rather than superficial or divisive topics that threaten unity and communal responsibility.

SPIRITUALITY

MC Lyte’s music does not often refer to her spiritual beliefs. Death is a consistent subject, but her music rarely reflects the rapper’s position on the life hereafter. Yet “Better Place” (Seven & Seven), “God Said Lyte” (Da Undaground Heat), and “Fabalous” (The Shit I Never Dropped) are three examples of her songs that do deal with spirituality and mortality. The narrator in “Better Place” delivers consolation for those grieving for the departure of their loved ones. “Better Place” works for listeners in a variety of situations. Whether the listener has lost a mother, brother, best friend, baby, significant other, or some other loved one, the narrator assures the listener that brighter days are ahead. Written in second person, the narrator calls out to the audience, creating intimacy by challenging them to share the same space. All three verses describe death as if the person has just passed away. Immediacy is the goal. It is as though the narrator is talking to someone in the first stage of grief, when despair and confusion are at their heaviest. Heaven and God are mentioned in this song, relating the sadness of death to the happiness of life beyond earth. Once again, MC Lyte’s focus stays on the living. She encourages the listener to hold on through devastating times.

Most of “God Said Lyte” is an exercise in self-aggrandizement. Lyte recounts some of her lines from other songs where she boasts of her excellent lyrical skills versus the horrendous ones of her opponents. At the same time, Lyte uses the metaphor of her name here (see sidebar: Rap Names). Relating herself to the beginning of God’s creation, she tells the listener that she is blessed with the skills to rip up the microphone. Her song
MC Lyte

Is reminiscent of Prince’s “My Name Is Prince” from his 1992 album *Love Symbol* where he talks about God creating him and making him an unforgettable musician. MC Lyte and Prince make brave moves. Not only do they position themselves as black people at the time of creation, but they

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**Rap Names**
*Jennifer R. Young*

Rap music follows the African oral tradition of signifyin(g), which includes the practice of using old word combinations (or in the case of music, previously recorded songs) to create new meanings that either compliment or critique a situation in an indirect way. In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Henry Louis Gates explains the connections between African American folktales and the pan-African Yoruba Esu-Elegbara, rhetorical strategies that inherently influence vernacular discourse in the African American tradition. Gena D. Caponi’s *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, & Slam Dunking* (1999) extends Gates’s claim, identifying the tropes in rap music that serve as metaphor for new social commentary on age-old issues.

Very much in this tradition of signifying, MC Lyte is a metaphorical rap name complete with a new spelling of the word. The standard definition of light refers to illumination or the levity of an object. MC Lyte uses several of its idiomatic expressions. She brings light to unfathomable situations; she asserts codes of ethics in her narratives by encouraging people to walk in the light; and she serves her competition with lyrical stomping. She calls out her name in many of her songs, using it as a conduit for affirming, calling, boasting, and roasting.

In “I Am the Lyte” she boasts of her rhyming capabilities, calling herself “Me the L the Y the T the E the me.” Lyte’s love song “Keep on Keepin’ On” also shows the MC spelling her name to remind others of her self-worth. Songs like “God Said Lyte” and “Brooklyn” from one of her later albums, *Da Undaground Heat*, continue to suggest that her rap name is part of her lyrical prowess.

On the other hand, there are rappers like Erick Sermon, Will Smith (who has abandoned his rap name the Fresh Prince), Tupac Shakur (spelled 2Pac on some albums), Missy Elliot, Kanye West, Keith Murray, Mike Jones, and Obie Trice, who do not use rap pseudonyms. Still, these MCs find ways to engage in signifyin’. For instance, both Obie Trice’s “Rap Name” (2004) and his remix featuring Keith Murray convey the same message: “Real name, no gimmicks.” His lack of a nickname gives him license to roast those who have them. Obie Trice uses his real name to signify on his opponents, suggesting that he is real, and his lyrics are real, no fiction necessary.

Lyte’s name is an assertion of her identity, her claiming a voice and space for herself and for others, like youth of the hip hop movement, who feel subjugated and marginalized by larger society.
also suggest their direct connection with God as human prototypes. While many have claimed to be descendants of Eve, few female artists and even fewer female rappers have actually likened themselves to Eve. “God Said Lyte” is full of bravado, and the verses are not even the song’s boldest statement.

MC Lyte raps over R&B singer Jaheim’s song in “Fabalous” [sic]. Jaheim’s song of the same name was part of his 2002 album Still Ghetto. (His version is spelled “Fabulous.”) Her lyrics are as uplifting as the children’s chorus. The song is about black people (especially children) believing in themselves despite what others think about their speech, dress, skin color, hair, or other attributes and actions. In essence, she sends the same message that Jaheim does: It is not a negative thing to be black. Similar in theme to Nina Simone and Weldon Irvin Jr.’s original 1969 song “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,” “Fabalous” is a song with high expectations. Jaheim and MC Lyte want kids to see themselves as gifts to the world, geniuses waiting to discover their own unique ways to contribute to society. This is spirit-guided even if MC Lyte does not claim it as such. She encourages her listeners to look within themselves for what’s beautiful and right.

On every one of Lyte’s albums, there is some reference to self-worth, mortality, heaven, or hell. From the underground world in “Cha, Cha, Cha” (Eyes on This) to despair and redemption in “Eyes Are the Soul” (Act Like You Know) to the insanity of substance abuse in “Druglord Superstar” (Bad as I Wanna B) and “King of Rock” (Seven & Seven), Lyte’s music is profound. One could infer that the rapper is unapologetic about addressing the ugly monsters in the room, those beasts that rob people of their freedom and obliterate their joy. If for no other reason, this rapper should be recognized for her music that often separates foul actions from otherwise beautiful people.

PIONEER MOVES

A woman in touch with her spirit, her womanhood, and her place in the community, Lyte has enjoyed a lot of firsts in her career. Her collaboration with Irish singer Sinead O’Connor was an innovative move for 1988. At that time, rappers were mostly collaborating with each other inside the genre. Categorized as an alternative rock singer, O’Connor could have tainted Lyte’s image as a rapper with a tough exterior. Their music video even came off as more vulnerable and touching, a tribute to love and happiness. Katrina Irving says, “O’Connor’s contribution to this rap record does not appropriate a threatening black sound and make it ‘safe.’ Instead, a dialogue is set up between the two women, each communicating in her own way” (118). With a few exceptions like Run-DMC and Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way” (1986), rappers did not start appearing on singles with artists from other genres until
the 1990s. In the spirit of “Ladies First” by Queen Latifah and Monie Love or “Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves” by Aretha Franklin and Annie Lennox, Lyte made a refreshing single that extended the art form, all while celebrating sisterhood. Since then, Lyte has collaborated with dozens of artists from Missy Elliot, LL Cool J, and Will Smith to Chuck D, Jamie Foxx, Giovanni Salah, and Moby.

Collaborations are important to the genre in that they expose more audiences from different ethnicities, nationalities, and socioeconomic groups to rap music. Lyte’s ability to maintain professional relationships with artists from different genres speaks to her versatility as well. Her work on movie soundtracks like Deliver Us from Eva, Wild, Wild West, and Sunset Park shows her ability to work in a medium that complements visual storytelling. Contributing music to movie projects seems like a natural progression for this rapper who is used to the storytelling aesthetic. Lyte has further experimented by working on a Bob Marley track. Her interest in combining reggae and rap is not original, yet it does show her reverence for another artist that moved a local Caribbean sound to the international stage.

Her import CD from the England-based Tuff Gong label was released in 2000. It features her rhymes over the Bob Marley track “Jammin’.” She has four versions of “Jammin’” (the original, Island remix, Ghetto Youth remix, and the Olav Basoski remix). The original “Jammin’” remix can also be found on Chant Down Babylon, a tribute album to Marley. This project seemed to be a logical step on the vertical ladder for Lyte. Rap music had been pervasive for decades, but Lyte’s “Jammin’” singles propelled her music into the international arena. In 2000 only a handful of American rappers were active in international music markets if one does not count international superstars such as Lauryn Hill or Sean Combs. Lyte’s pioneer move to create this import CD suggests her foresight about the music industry and her capabilities to keep the music going. With “Jammin’,” Lyte helps sustain American rap in an international market.

Regarding more international exposure, Lyte had the honor of being the first female rapper to perform at Carnegie Hall in 1990. One of the most significant venues for classical and popular music, Carnegie Hall has hosted musicians on its world-renowned stage since 1890. Lyte also became the first rapper to take on another international venue: the USO (United Service Organizations) for the American military. Lyte toured in July 1997 to Italy, Greece, Sicily, and Sardinia to perform for sailors, marines, and their families. Ellen Brody, executive director of entertainment at the USO, said, “the troops and their families loved her so much—we had to ask her back” (“USO”). Lyte embarked on a second tour when she traveled to Germany in November 1998 to entertain American service members stationed there. The rapper noted, “It’s wonderful to have been invited back once again. We hope to give the troops an experience that’s fun, motivating, uplifting, and different from their everyday routine” (“USO”). Since Lyte’s tours, other popular rappers like
Master P, Lil’ Romeo, and Lil’ Mo have volunteered, but as with other hip hop milestones, MC Lyte was the first.

LYTE’S IMPACT AND LEGACY

Flourishing in artistic activities, Lyte continues to reinvent herself without compromising her integrity. In addition to writing, performing, and producing songs, she is an entrepreneur, educator, and philanthropist. She co-owns the Shaitel Boutique in San Fernando Valley, California; she hosts a weekend Sirius Satellite radio show on HOT JAMZ; and she has several voice-over commercial credits including Nike, McDonald’s, Pepsi, and Wherehouse Music. She is even the animated voice for Tia, one of the dolls in the Mattel Diva Starz collection. As a seasoned television personality, Lyte has served as the backstage host for VH1’s Hip-Hop Honors several years in a row. During the 2005 ceremony, she interviewed predecessors like Salt, Spinderella, Pepa, Big Daddy Kane, and Russell Simmons.

In addition to television appearances as herself, she has over a dozen credits on her acting resumé. She joins other artists who transitioned successfully from performing on concert stages to studio sets. Lyte has appeared in numerous television shows—including guest appearances on For Your Love, Strong Medicine, and The District, as well as a cast role on Half and Half—and several films, including Civil Brand, Burn Hollywood Burn, and the critically acclaimed independent film Train Ride. Still, her passion for music, which she has had since her teen days in Brooklyn, has not faded. In 2006 she released “Wonder Years,” produced by DJ Premier, as the first single off her next album Back to Lyte. Lyte’s talent for responding to the sign of the times is evident. As advertised on her official Web site, her latest album will have musical guests from her days with First Priority as well as artists that she has met along her journey.

Through the years, Lyte has changed record companies, updated her musical style, traveled the world, and created entrepreneurial and philanthropic projects. More noticeably, she has traded her Pumas for pumps. She no longer creates girl characters who weep over clowns named Sam; MC Lyte’s music and other endeavors have an integrity that demands respect for herself, her audience, and the ever-maturing movement that is hip hop.

See also: Queen Latifah, Roxanne Shanté, Lil’ Kim, Salt-N-Pepa

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FURTHER RESOURCES


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Eric B. & Rakim are the J. D. Salingers of hip hop. Like Salinger, the author of *The Catcher in the Rye* who famously retreated from the public eye and stopped releasing books at the height of his career, Rakim Allah has long maintained a self-imposed exile from the calcium light of the media, routinely shading himself from being misquoted and misrepresented by the press. And while Eric B. may have acted as de facto ambassador for the act, his gruffness and aphoristic style of communication has frequently left reviewers, critics,
and biographers feeling a bit shortchanged. After the group broke up in 1992, Eric B. & Rakim retreated to the company of good friends and family, and their relative anonymity, reclusive propensities, and reticent natures cloaked their work in an alluring cloud of mystique that only served to bolster their cult stardom and iconic standing.

From the beginning, Rakim’s style was that of a collagist rather than a storyteller. To Rakim, an MC was defined by his innate ability to collocate words from every facet of human life—from the real mean streets of New York to the metaphysical highways of the mind—into a lexical mosaic of verbs, nouns, and adjectives. He eschewed hip hop’s conventional narrative structures for a mixed bag of topics and themes refracted through a prism of metaphors and similes. There is rarely a story, a tale, or a fable to be heard on Eric B. & Rakim’s earlier works. “My Melody” could just as accurately have been titled “My Medley,” what with Rakim’s casual but steady assortment of abstract boastings and Sucker MC disses. The R is an abstractionist. He rhymes for the sake of rhyming. Eric B.’s sonically abstruse productions lend themselves naturally to Rakim’s conceptual rhymes.

In the mid to late 1980s, there was nothing in the sonicscape of rap more abstract than the grimy boom-bap of an Eric B. production. To produce their hit “Follow the Leader,” Eric B. mixed a volatile cocktail of breakneck drums from Baby Huey’s “Listen to Me,” horns from Coke Escovedo’s “I Wouldn’t Change a Thing,” and an earth-rumbling bass line. Bob James’s oft-sampled “Nautilus” finishes off the mix with its jazz-funk sound. With an instrumental beat of this caliber on tape rotation, Rakim would literally stare at his speakers for hours, attempting to give lyrical form to this abstractness. He was a blind artist painting rhymes on an invisible canvas, as he was wont to say. And the beats themselves could evoke a montage of visuals for the R: the darker and more frenetic a beat, the fiercer and more furious the concepts he would spin. With all of this in mind, “Follow the Leader” has Rakim stepping into the gale with malice to deliver what rightfully earned him his MC crown: skills defined. Roughly one minute into the cut, the listener is skyrocketed upward and outward, millions of miles into the cosmos, where stargazing is experienced at the speed of light. Sooner than the retina can adjust to the sun, the planets, and the interstellar medium rapidly receding from view and to the eclipse that follows, the R suddenly appears in the void like a star exploding forth from a vacuum. And that’s only the first verse.

Eric B. kept the music fully equalized at the conceptual level with “Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em.” He renders Rufus Thomas’s “Do the Funky Penguin,” the Commodores’ “Assembly Line,” and Bob James’s “Nautilus”/“Night on Bald Mountain,” all but rhythmically and melodically unrecognizable as Rakim takes his characteristic rap-as-weaponry metaphor and stretches it seamlessly over the track spanning an entire verse. The human mouth has been metaphorically compared to weapons since biblical times (Rev. 1:16, 19:15). But no poet has explored the metaphor more assiduously than Rakim.
Like an age-old prophet, he wages war against the enemies of Rah with his words. Rakim’s mouthpiece is a gun, his tongue the trigger mechanism, his lyrics the ammunition. Though Rakim never personally calls out potential challengers to his throne by their actual names, one can be sure that each lyrical bullet has the ever-generic Sucker MC moniker inscribed upon its shell. And like a lyrical marksman with MCs locked in the crosshairs, he hits each one squarely with the rhythm. With bulletproof rhymes like these, Rakim is the original Teflon MC.

Rakim could shift his metaphorical focus from weapons of the hand to the apperceptive powers of the mind, his metaphors becoming increasingly intricate while remaining altogether long-playing. “In the Ghetto” takes the listener on a socio-religious journey of Dostoyevskian proportions, traveling through the visual cortex via Rakim’s all-seeing, panoptic third eye. Here is a potential thesis on the Five-Percenter mythos and the locomotion of thought (see sidebar: Five-Percenter Terminology and Hip Hop Slang).

**Five-Percenter Terminology and Hip Hop Slang**

*Shawn Bernardo*

Many phrases from hip hop slang are derived from the Nation of Islam, and specifically from the NOI’s Five Percenters (aka the Nation of Gods and Earths), a splinter group founded by Clarence 13X in 1963. Wu-Tang Clan, Eric B. & Rakim, Busta Rhymes, and many other groups employ Five Percenter terminology in their rhymes, as well as its numerology. The Five Percent Nation was founded on numerology. Its followers believe that there has always been a great divide between the inhabitants of planet Earth: eighty-five percent suffer from an ignorance of self and the world in which they live; ten percent benefit from a partial knowledge of truth and use it to exploit and control the eighty-five percent, and five percent possess the full wisdom of self-divinity and seek to liberate the eighty-five percent. Five Percenters memorize and recite the Infinity Lessons, which further explain these concepts of ignorance versus knowledge of self and which present black men as gods and black women as earths.

Rakim is one rapper who used the microphone to call the hip hop faithful to Islam. Rakim infused his raps with references to the Five Percent Nation. His language was freshly dipped in the terminology of the Five Percenters’ Supreme Mathematics and Supreme Alphabet. As a servant and messenger of the Supreme Being, Rakim regarded Islam as the foundation stone of life and set out to teach the world who was the sole controller of the universe: Ruler, Allah, Kingdom, Islam, Master. Before acknowledging the nation of MCs that he influenced, it is worth lifting the stylus from the record to note his Pythagorean penchant for numerology. Rakim has always entertained an ongoing fascination with numeral 7 and its Five Percent associations with the mathematical perfection of his Lord and Creator. The seventh letter of the
Rakim has a tattoo of the number 7 encircled by the words “RAKIM ALLAH” on his left bicep. The R was the first god of rap. He also identified himself as hip hop agent 007: William Michael Griffin, the god-MC born with three seven-letter words in his name. Rakim would make countless references to sevens throughout his rap career, from *Paid in Full* to *The 18th Letter*. Both albums were released in the seventh year of a decade, 1987 and 1997 respectively, and Rakim’s seventh studio project and forthcoming LP *The Seventh Seal* is set for release in 2007. Ever since Rakim Allah put Islam in the mix, well over seventy underground and mainstream acts have raised their mics eastward. A notable seven are Lakim Shabazz, Digable Planets, Poor Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, Kam, and Brother Ali.

Further Resources

“Change le Beat.” Along with sampling sounds from these well-known songs, Eric B stitches in a drumbeat and tops off the track with a then-obscure flute riff that he sampled from the Soul Searchers’ “Ashley’s Roachclip.” This musical montage sets the stage for Rakim to tell his autobiographical story of a hoodlum made good. He waxes nostalgic about forsaking a life of criminality and criminal-mindedness—the cut is replete with a veristic description of a robbery in progress with Kid Wizard quick on the draw—for the promise of getting paid as a bona fide rap artist. Rakim’s portrayal of real-life situations and their environs is accomplished with an almost Proustian attention to narrative detail as he takes the time to highlight the startled, apprehensive smile of a man being robbed for what he has and the lint-lined pocket of a man who has not.

The eye of Rah is at its most perceptive when focused on his preeminence in concert. Performing live onstage is the métier of any MC and it is peculiar that the Mic Controller was not known for his stage-scorching pyrotechnics. He was first and foremost an author of rhyme flows. The R would pen raps in the dark on spotlighted pieces of paper. During recording sessions like the early, formative ones with Marley Marl, he would also write spontaneous verse, hastily scribing cheat sheets that would be brought into the mic booth for recitation. He would recount the process of bringing a verse to life in “Move the Crowd.” Listening to an instrumental track of tediously programmed drums and synthy interpolations from James Brown’s “Don’t Tell It” and the J.B.’s “Hot Pants Road” and contemplating how to properly set his audience in motion, Rakim is drawn closer and closer to a lone stereo speaker until he is hit with a lyrical epiphany: Words symphonize into rhymes by the aural gravity of the very track to which he is rapping. Thus inspired, Rakim’s raps write themselves, in a manner of speaking. In scores of Eric B. & Rakim joints, references would continue to be made to the ingenuity of songwriting and to the musical scaffolding that both supported and inspired Rakim’s verse.

While Rakim is often described by eyewitnesses as a tad stage-shy, a simple keyword search of Eric B. & Rakim’s complete lyrical anthology reveals that three words were invoked more than any other single piece of language: microphone, rhymes, and crowd. Rakim would take a novelistic approach to the contextualization of these words in a panoply of onstage anthems: “Move the Crowd,” “I Know You Got Soul,” “Put Your Hands Together,” and so on. Listening to these cuts in tandem, one is provided with a broadly detailed impression of what it is genuinely like for MCs to put their skill set to the test on the ultimate proving ground—the stage. Rakim welcomes the listener into the gray corners of his mind, from which rhymes are formulated, then to the white-hot spotlight of center stage, where Eric B. & Rakim prepare to perform before a sold-out crowd. Rakim expands on this theme in “I Know You Got Soul” and telescopes in on the action. A marvel of lyrical stagecraft, no rapper makes an entrance like the R. The stage is a void. A microphone stands idle. Rakim resists a vaudevillian rush to the footlights.
He consciously allows the less skillful rhyme sayers to have first crack at treading the boards, whereupon they act as a prefatory foil to Rakim’s much-anticipated appearance on the mic. In good time, Eric B. lets the record go and in heavy syncopation drum kicks from Funkadelic’s “You’ll Like It Too” slam like anvils from the rafters over a slap-happy guitar riff from Bobby Byrd’s “I Know You Got Soul.” Without warning, Rakim descends to deliver his soulful refrain. His stagemanship whips the crowd into a frenzy. Some fans nearly break their wrists from clapping so hard while others dislocate their jaws from lip-synching. Rakim even goes so far as to proclaim that he is the unmoving mover of crowds in “Put Your Hands Together.”

RAKIM

No rapper has influenced hip hop more profoundly than Rakim. This rap architect and master builder of rhymes was born William Michael Griffin, Jr., on January 28, 1968, in suburban Wyandanch, Long Island (known as Crime Dance, Strong Island, to the initiated). His mom, Cynthia Griffin, was a civil servant for the State of New York and his father, William Sr., a hard-working family man, an auto mechanic, and an airplane maintenance supervisor with American Airlines. Rakim’s parents met in Newark, New Jersey, at the Highway Inn, a nightclub where jazz great Sarah Vaughan was headlining. Music was a rich, participatory custom of the household; a mix of classical, jazz, rock, soul, and disco lilted through every room. Mother Griffin was an aficionada of opera divas and jazz vocalists. She once sang the blue notes on a Brooklyn-based radio station, but her career as a singer was abruptly cut short by her marriage and the birth of her children.

Rakim was a pet nephew of 1950s R&B legend Ruth Brown, whose sultry chart-burners helped establish Atlantic Records as an industry powerhouse. The Queen Mother of the Blues acted as a kind of surrogate parent, minding the boy now and again and sometimes taking him to see her perform her by-then retrospective concerts. It was Brown who first exposed Rakim to the music business. She continually expressed an appreciation for Rakim’s lyrical aptitude and rhythmic faculties, and he would later rely on her to keep him grounded and focused as he grew musically. As a boy, Rakim aspired to become a professional saxophonist. He picked up the tenor sax in the fourth grade, but preferring a deeper sound, he soon switched to the baritone sax and participated in statewide music competitions. Later years found him playing the drums, an avocation he retained throughout his life and career.

But the turntable, the newest and most innovatively adaptive musical apparatus, was Rakim’s true love. Cutting and scratching became his principle forte under the name Kid Wizard. The turntablist DJ Maniac, a friend of Rakim’s older brother, occasionally brought DJ equipment over to the house and let the Kid practice his wizardry as the DJ’s apprentice. Scratching with DJ Maniac and listening to the mixtapes that his brother Stevie played in his
boombox first set Rakim on the expressway to rap. As hip hop gained popularity in New York City, Rakim was swept up in the movement and became an avid devotee of the four elements of the urban vernacular arts: DJing, MCing, break dancing, and graffiti. He was reportedly the one and only graffiti artist in all of Crime Dance, throwing up his ineffaceable tag on Suffolk county walls and even bombing his own quarters with a spray-painted depiction of Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk from the cosmonautical funk group Parliament. Rakim also trained himself in b-boying, from pop-locking to backspinning to street styling. And he also experimented with the vocal-percussive techniques of beatboxing, often called the fifth element of hip hop. But the real ether of interest for Rah was becoming an MC. He scribbled rhymes on notebook paper while his classmates were adding and subtracting fractions and decimals.

Rakim cultivated his penchant for rhyming and developed a distinctive style of vocal delivery under the tutelage and mentorship of DJ Maniac. He spent hours deconstructing the songs of his favorite rap groups: Fantastic Five, Furious Five, Cold Crush Brothers, Treacherous Three, and Force MCs. And when it came to his own style of rapping, Rakim was most concerned that his listeners perceive him as a boy of letters, an educated MC who was capable of lacing his own lyrics with a proficient utilization of the English language, particularly in regard to diction, syntax, and creative expression. His linguistic bent and inspiration came from a confluence of old-school wordsmiths and raconteurs: Grandmaster Melle Mel, Grandmaster Caz, and Kool Moe Dee. Refusing to bite any one particular style, the R set out to be a trendsetter with originality, versatility, and innovation.

Rakim was too young to be recruited by any of the neighborhood MC crews, and he was therefore unable to make anything of his newfound rap alias, Love Kid Wiz. But as he matured in years, Rakim stepped from behind the turntables to be in front of the microphone, rapping for DJ Maniac and other resident DJs like Teddy Tuff and Cool Breeze. He was introduced to the Love Brothers crew, with whom he would perform at outdoor and indoor jam parties both above and below ground, battling older MCs for respect and defending his own fledgling title in parks, backyards, gymnasiums, and basements. Once knighted by his peers as a true MC, he participated in his first major hip hop venue: an MC contest and rap convention hosted by the Original Human Beatbox, Doug E. Fresh, and produced by Mike and Dave Records of Crash Crew fame. That night at Harriet Tubman School in New York City, Biz Markie, the Clown Prince of Rap, made the music with his mouth while Rakim rhymed a cappella and moved his first crowd. MCing became commonplace for the R and kids soon forgot his previous adventures on the wheels of steel.

ERIC B.

It is Eric B. who will be long remembered as a DJ and shortly forgotten as an MC (see sidebar: Crooked Fingers). Born in 1965 in the heart of East
Crooked Fingers
Shawn Bernardo

Eric B. scratched his way into the history books as a produttore universale, a DJ skilled in all aspects of beat production. From the crate to the needle, he defined the modern producer. Both Eric B. and Rakim dug deep into their family music plots, dirtying their fingertips looking for the perfect beat and the Holy Grail of vinyl. What set Eric B. apart from previous producers was his sudden and decisive step away from routinely sampling popular R&B hits to searching for that lost and forgotten James Brown & Co. groove in rows upon stacks of proto-funk vinyl. He approached each LP with the ear of a minimalist—one that worked in a reductive tradition like Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman, Run-DMC and LL Cool J—and like a chandler he was adept at melting waxen platters down to their essential loop-friendly ostinatos and recasting them anew in those flickery, stripped-down melodies and atonal rhythms that comprise an Eric B. production like “I Ain’t No Joke” or “I Know You Got Soul.” He put it down hard on the SP-1200 sampler and the Roland TR-808 drum machine, the meat and potatoes of hip hop musical production past, and demonstrated to subsequent producers that they could utilize the same equipment to bang out fresher beats by tapping into atypical sample sources from different genres of music and manipulating them in new and innovative ways. But the real innovation that Eric B. brought to the tables was his Illadelph-rooted technique of cross-fader transforming and his early contribution to the art of turntablism: “Chinese Arithmetic.” As a matter of course, this theme-based remix of a retranslated mélodie orientale has been derided by fans and critics as substandard filler—like all of his scratch-and-cut old-school DJ showcase blends: “Eric B Is on the Cut,” “Eric B. Never Scared,” “Eric B. Made My Day”—an adhesive digression from the verbal mathematics being steadily formulated by the R on flanking tracks. Yet the composition itself is literally built by Eric B. from scratch as he handles the turntable like an instrument throughout the track, manipulating aphontetical sounds and sound effects with nary a Rakim vocal snippet, perchance the only MC the DJ ever effectively put in the mix. While this nonfigurative style of DJing was later popularized by new-school turntablism virtuosos like the wave-twisting DJ Q-Bert and the Invisbl Skratch Piklz, the thematics would be expanded upon by audiographers like D-Styles, DJ Shadow, and RJD2. There was a time when DJs stood in front and to the side of their MC counterparts, and it is a facile thing to play past Eric B. and his skillfulness as a producer when he forever stands behind Rakim, one of the greatest MCs to ever nominate his DJ for president.

Elmhurst, Queens, to a Department of Water Resources workman and an eighth grade middle school teacher, Louis Eric Barrier was every bit as musically inclined as his counterpart. As a boy he played trumpet and guitar but
traded them in for the turntable while a student at W.C. Bryant High School in Long Island City. As a teenager he performed at local clubs and roller rinks and by 1985 his quick-mix virtuosity was such that he was able to secure a job as a mobile roadshow DJ for New York City’s 107.5 WBLS-FM. The station was home to Mr. Magic and his famed Rap Attack radio show featuring the Magellan of sampling, Marley Marl, as in-house DJ. Eric B. and Marley Marl were all-purpose roommates in Queensbridge, 12th Street Apartment 2E, where the superproducer operated a makeshift studio and ran his newly founded Cold Chillin’ label out of the livingroom of his sister’s apartment.

During that time, the R had made a trip to DJ Maniac’s studio to immortalize himself on cassette, a ninety-minute megablast of Rakim’s latest hits, that he originally intended to floss with on his future college campus. Included in this songbook of old rhymes and recycled verses was a raw and uncut version of “My Melody,” which was first conceived on a miniature Casio keyboard. Eric B. met Rakim in the context of this very recording through the auspices of Alvin Toney, a mutual acquaintance and future record executive. With one play-through a partnership was formed: Eric B. & Rakim, established 1985. Initially Rakim had reservations about entering into any contractual commitment as he still considered himself college bound. He had also recently discovered the Five Percent Nation and devoted much time to the understanding of his divine Asiatic pedigree and studying the supreme mathematical sciences of the secularized Islamic sect. But after adapting the name Rakim Allah, he felt somehow destined to be the first deity of rap capable of subliminally spreading degrees of knowledge across the world as “The God” (see sidebar: Islam and Hip Hop).

**Islam and Hip Hop**

_Aine McGlynn_

There are two “proto-Islamic heritages that feed contemporary rap” (Allen 165). The first is the Nation of Islam, whose secular leader Louis Farrakhan speaks on behalf of the late prophet Elijah Muhammad. NOI philosophy is rooted in Elijah Muhammad’s apocalyptic vision of the world, wherein black people will eventually defeat their devilish white masters in a great celestial battle. Before the battle takes place, though, NOI maintained that as many black people as possible need to be converted and therefore saved. The second derivation of Islam that hip hop draws on is the Five Percent Nation. Five Percent referred to the percentage of the population that was actually enlightened. The other ninety-five percent were either blindly ignorant or actively engaged in keeping the black population down. This splinter group of the NOI was formed by Clarence 13X, a disgruntled member of the NOI who left that group in 1963 and sought to form a more loosely bound collective of young members of the Harlem community. Clarence 13X
elucidated the “Supreme Alphabet” as well as the “Supreme Mathematics.” In the Alphabet, each letter stands for a word: A for Allah, B for Be or Born, G for God, and so on. In the Mathematics, 1 equals knowledge, 2 equals wisdom, 3 equals understanding, and so forth.

The Nation of Islam and its Five Percent offshoot both gained a great deal of currency in the hip hop community. It created order out of a chaotic society governed by racist and hegemonic authorities that excluded them entirely, they believed, because of their race. A philosophy that proclaimed that all black men were kings was empowering in the face of American nationalism that continually relegated its black population to the margins. That both conscious and gangster rap groups took on the core tenets of the Nation of Islam demonstrated the contradictory ways each style of rap imagined the improvement of the black community. For the former, the individual subsumed himself in the collective struggle, while for the latter, an aggressive individualism would ensure the black man’s rise to power (Allen 172). The Zulu Nation and the Nation of Islam share some similarities. The Infinity Lessons that formed the core of Zulu Nation philosophy were formatted in the same question-and-answer style, while their content “drew on the Black Muslim’s evocation of a glorious, original African past” (Chang 106). Both nations also share a belief in life beyond this planet. They both cite the American government’s denial of UFOs as a prime example of the type of obfuscation that governments enact upon their populations in order to control them.

The Nation of Islam, largely because of the charisma and unwavering Afrocentrism of its leader, Louis Farrakhan, was a persuasive doctrine for young black men to grasp hold of in the late eighties and early nineties. References to NOI, the Five Percenters, and Farrakhan pop up throughout the Native Tongues’ recording careers. Beats, Rhyme and Life in particular, recorded after Q-Tip’s conversion to Islam, demonstrates the clean living principles that come along with adopting Islamic or proto-Islamic beliefs. Wu-Tang Clan, Busta Rhymes, Brand Nubian, and Rakim are all artists who maintain NOI political stances in their rap.

Works Cited


Both Eric B. and Rakim’s parents thought rap to be a silly and impractical fad that would never pay the rent. Eric B. was nevertheless able to sufficiently persuade their parents to let the two hit the studio to get paid in full. Through an unwritten agreement, Rakim would be compensated monetarily for his
efforts but opted to be represented only as a special guest on all branding and promotional hype (hence the “Eric B. featuring Rakim” designation printed on the group’s first twelve-inch singles), thereby giving him an opportunity to bounce out of the venture at will. Purportedly this arrangement caused some misperceptions as some first-time listeners believed Eric B. to be the MC and Rakim the DJ. Even more confusingly, the twosome was nearly known as Eric. B & Freddie Foxxx. When Eric B. was taking applications for MCs, Foxxx, aka Bumpy Knuckles, was hired for the position but failed to show up for work on his first day of recording at Marley Marl’s studio. As designated rapper, Rakim stepped up to the mic and recorded “My Melody” and “Eric B. Is President,” the first-ever Eric B. & Rakim singles released in the spring of 1986 on Robert Hill’s Harlem-based indie label, Zakia Records.

Much dispute exists about who in fact was the mastermind behind these tracks and correspondingly the whole of Eric B. & Rakim’s production catalogue. Discrepancies abound throughout the engineering credits; the atomic beatsmith Large Professor, breakologist DJ Mark the 45 King, and the late and unsung Paul C have laid their claims, and even Rakim himself has lately claimed to have self-produced the bulk of his repertoire. Although this hip hop whodunit is of course beyond the scope of this biography, an investigation should doubtless begin with Eric B.’s unsuccessful debut as one of the first MC-producers to come solo on his own 95th Street Recordings label (Eric B., 1995).

All sources agree that Marley Marl can be credited with arranging and layering “My Melody.” He was assisted by his cousin and Queensbridge champion, MC Shan, who was in the studio when the tracks were recorded pro bono. Both attempted to hype Rakim in the booth, not recognizing that a new über-sedate style of rapping was being birthed right before their ears. The R may have paid them no mind because his eyes were fixed upon the pages of his notebook, wherefrom he recited lyrics into the mic that he had conceived ad-libitum only hours before. Musically speaking, both “My Melody” and “Eric B. Is President” were entirely orchestrated by Marley Marl at his workstation; witness the identical drum kit that he used contemporaneously on MC Shan’s “The Bridge.” And while both singles were in no way mixed down, the roughness of their fluttering vocal distortions and dub-generated feedback elicited a gritty cacophony of sound that the hip hop street embraced.

**PAID IN FULL**

The Awesome Two (Special K & Teddy Ted) were the first to broadcast Eric B. & Rakim’s inaugural single, “Eric B. Is President,” on 105.9 WHBI-FM, and though it barely peaked commercially on Billboard’s Top R&B Singles charts, it was celebrated by partygoers as the most danceable track of
the year. Rakim first heard his song live on the radio from the cracked window of a parked car. He later recalled that it was at this moment that he knew the hand of Allah was fixed squarely upon Eric B. & Rakim. He made the decision then and there to enter the rap game as a professional player. What had begun as a part-time hobby would flourish into a full-time career spanning seventeen singles and four albums, three of which would be certified gold by the RIAA: Paid in Full, Follow the Leader, and Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em.

Eric B. & Rakim’s career played out on fast forward. With the local success of the first singles, the group was snapped up by 4th & Broadway in the spring of 1987 to create their seminal flagship LP, Paid in Full. While the album itself promptly earned a spot on Billboard’s Top Black Albums chart and the group a standing on their annual Top Black Artists list, each new Eric B. & Rakim single was a prêt-à-écouter classic, and “Paid in Full,” “I Ain’t No Joke,” and “I Know You Got Soul” would all be listed on Billboard’s Top Hip-Hop Singles charts. “Paid in Full” was a club hit at home and a discothèque sensation abroad compliments of a remix by Coldcut titled “Seven Minutes of Madness,” the first commercially successful one of its kind. To Eric B.’s extreme dissatisfaction—he referred to the remix as “girly disco”—the experimental DJ team triaged “Paid in Full” and merged it with the strident microtones of Israeli mezzo soprano Ofra Haza’s “Im Nin Alu.” The remixed cut was soon featured on the soundtrack of the LA gangbland flick, Colors. The enigmatic electronic group M/A/R/R/S would also utilize Haza’s vocals and a Rakim quotable in their house-adapted acoustical collage, “Pump Up the Volume,” a one-off single that was heralded as the first sample-based number one smash in the UK.

The release of “I Know You Got Soul” would prove more controversial as Eric B. & Rakim’s sampling of James Brown sideman Bobby Byrd’s “I Know You Got Soul” resulted in swift legal action against the group for pirating material without permission or due compensation. The protracted lawsuit was one of the first highly profiled copyright infringement cases of a musician seeking statutory damages from another musician for reappropriating a prior recording into a new (and admittedly more soulful) composition. Despite all repercussions, Eric B. & Rakim would continue to raid the legacy cache of James Brown and Co. In doing so they started the godfather rap vogue; groups like the Jungle Brothers, Ultramagnetic MC’s, and Kool G Rap & DJ Polo began sampling the rhythm section of the J.B.s. On “Talkin’ All That Jazz,” the original sampling advocate Daddy-O of Stetsasonic would point out that doing so was mutually beneficial to both the sampler and samplee, as it revived the careers (and bank accounts) of outmoded and pensioned-off musicians, predominantly the Godfather of Soul. Brown would later respond to these rappers on a sample-based song of his own called “I’m Real,” where he alludes to Eric B. & Rakim’s “I Know You Got Soul” and personally calls out the God, reminding him that James Brown invented soul.
Keeping pace with the ensuing successes of *Paid in Full*, Eric B. & Rakim were sprinting with Marley Marl and his illustrious Juice Crew, booking gigs through their manager Tyrone “Fly Ty” Williams and performing their re-souled rap arias in some of New York’s most respected hip hop venues such as Latin Quarter, Union Square, and the Roxy, where ecstatic fans tossed rolled-up dollar bills on stage to pay their entertainers to the fullest. Positive reaction to the group was such that stewardship of their business portfolio was swiftly turned over to Rush Management and up-and-coming rap moguls Lyor Cohen and Russell Simmons. The latter was introduced to the group by Rakim’s brother Ronnie, who played the keyboard for Rap’s first mainstream artist, Kurtis Blow, a Rush client. Over 750,000 units moved and Eric B. & Rakim would consolidate their marketability by shopping their sophomore album to MCA for a 1 million-dollar long-term recording contract, a first-time anomaly in the rap industry and a half million more than Island would offer the group to stay with their 4th & Broadway imprint. This meteoric rise to fame and fortune struck Eric B. & Rakim completely unprepared. Though Eric B. seemed at ease mobbing a ghostly Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow with Gucci interior and Rakim a white-on-white Mercedes-Benz with a landau top by Louis Vuitton, a $15,000 sound system, and a custom Euro-plate on his front bumper that read BENZINO, the R also found himself standing in line for a century-old brownstone mansion. Paid to the fullest, Eric B. & Rakim geared up to lead their listeners into the age of modern rap with *Follow the Leader*, their second album.

**FOLLOW THE LEADER**

As the *New York Times* reported that rap music and hip hop culture were hijacking mainstream America in the late 1980s, fans telephoned their favorite radio stations and hit the request line for the next single from Eric B. & Rakim. The R heard the call and blessed his followers with “Microphone Fiend,” a verse to end all verses. His delivery is a ticking clock of intensity as he confronts a serial addiction to dopeness and spits his autobiography over sixty-nine consecutive bars of pure, unadulterated heat. This cut cinched Rakim’s status as the greatest of all time among his contemporaries. Other singles followed suit: “The R,” a lecture on rapping, and “Follow the Leader,” an event horizon that defined the stock in trade of the rap soloist. The latter single was nominated one of Melody Maker’s singles of the year for 1988 and would gain a peak position on the Billboard’s Top Hip-Hop Singles chart.

A dozen or so singles off the previous and subsequent Eric B. & Rakim albums were translated into videos. And “Follow the Leader,” the first rap video epic and period piece of the new televised world of hip hop, would premiere on the pilot episode of *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988. Throughout Eric B.
& Rakim’s video productions, the R took on myriad personas: imam, dictator, politician, racketeer, businessman, soldier, celebrity, playboy, baller, fugitive, and rap star. Eric B. was contented playing the background and standing sentinel as DJ and hip hop strongman. Aside from two-toned FILA tracksuits, throwback hoodies, and an endless wardrobe of leather and suede gear, Eric B. & Rakim were most often filmed rocking their aureate trunk jewelry, custom designed by Jacob the Jeweler (diamond setter to the rap stars), and those ghetto-fabulous, faux-Gucci leather getups that were tailor-made by twenty-four-hour-a-day Harlem couturier Dapper Dan’s, who was incidentally the go-to spot for the group’s designer upholstery. As they matured as artists and men, later videos and photo shoots presented the two modeling Italian sport coats, Coogie sweaters, and Nehru-collared shirts. Eric B. & Rakim could also reinvent themselves on the pop/R&B catwalk. Their hip-hop crossover duet with label mate Jody Watley, “Friends,” initially slated for Will Smith, catapulted Eric B. & Rakim into Top 10 rankings for the first and last time on both Billboard Pop and R&B singles charts during an era when rap music received less than modest radio play. With a respectful Kangol tip to Chaka Khan and Melle Mel and their Grammy winner “I Feel for You,” the success of the Eric B. & Rakim and Jody Watley team-up, as well as Rakim’s duet with English vocalist Mica Paris on her Contribution LP in 1990, would make permanent the now-formulaic pop/R&B singer X featuring rapper X prerequisite for a Billboard chart-topper. Eric B. & Rakim would never again touch the mainstream. Nonetheless they would come close with their amatory “What’s on Your Mind” track for the House Party 2 soundtrack.

The group also recorded two jingles for the malt liquor St. Ides, “Real Men’s Drink” and “Get Some,” that were aired with some frequency on major R&B stations until the 8.2% alcohol by volume malt liquor became embroiled in controversy and their advertising banned from the radio. Even more contentious was Rakim’s open endorsement of the “Crooked I.” As a devout Muslim, he was obliged to abstain from all things alcoholic and his community responded reproachfully to his willful and dubious associations with Pabst Brewing Company. His response to the criticism was dismissive and unapologetic, and Rakim Allah would later elevate himself from the cooler to the top shelf as the new hip hop face of Hennessy.

Eric B. and Rakim took a surprising two-year breather at the top of their game, precisely when they had gained a wider audience and appeal on both sides of the railway. Rakim stepped away from the studio to mourn the deaths of his father and good friend Paul C. McKasty, the white whiz kid music engineer who was in the process of teaching him how to freak the SP-1200 for Eric B. & Rakim’s upcoming Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em LP. Paul C. was murdered in his sleep by unknown assailants for unknown reasons and Rakim honored his memory by placing his senior snapshot next to a photo of
Rakim’s father on the back of the album cover. Meanwhile, Eric B. founded Lynn Starr Productions and Mega Starr Management, working with artists like Freddie Foxxx on *Freddie Foxxx Is Here* and Kool G. Rap on *Wanted: Dead or Alive*.

With the R’s sudden and prolonged disappearing act, would-be haters alleged that he was doing time in Rikers Island for slanging crack cocaine, a rumor as tabloid worthy as the unfateful rivalry between Rakim and Big Daddy Kane. The R had opened fire on the smooth but raw-edged MC in a demo for “Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em,” the eventual leadoff single for Eric B. & Rakim’s third album, but mics were holstered when Kane heard the track via Eric B.’s brother and called Rakim to wave the white rag. Both rappers agreed not to battle and the lyrics in question were withdrawn. Notwithstanding, an unreleased Eric B. & Rakim demo titled “Hypnotic” does appear to contain a snipe at Kane and, if accurate, it is the only extant example of Rakim personally calling out another rapper for battle on tape. Rakim would later allege that a kind of ultimate rapping pay-per-view was in the works where the two MCs would face off before a televised audience for upwards of $50,000, but the proposal got scrapped at some point during the planning stages.

**LET THE RHYTHM HIT ’EM**

Eric B. & Rakim’s hiatus proved far too long an absence from the rap game. Stylistically, Eric B. had revved up his production tempo, and Rakim responded by accelerating his rapping speed and downshifting to new lyrical themes. Critics, fans, and even the group’s manager, Amanda Scheer-Demme, grumbled that Eric B.’s beats stalled out behind Rakim’s flow on *Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em*. Still, the album was one of *Spin* magazine’s top picks for 1990 and earned the group a handsome five mics from *The Source*, that magazine’s highest rating.

Eric B. & Rakim released several singles (“Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em,” “Mahogany,” and “In the Ghetto”) before they finally brought the sun down on their empire with “Don’t Sweat the Technique” and the most knocking of swan songs, “Juice (Know the Ledge).” Released in May 1990, *Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em* was the group’s final album. At this juncture in their career, both artists wanted to release solo albums as their last recordings under their MCA contract and planned to later reunite as a collective on another label. The final straw for the group was Eric B.’s refusal to sign a release for Rakim, an incident that would land the rapper in court battling his ex-partner and ex-label for half a decade. With animosity in the air, Eric B. & Rakim broke up in 1992. They were last seen together in the Big Willie-styled “Don’t Sweat the Technique” video and as cameo characters along with Big Daddy Kane, Kid Frost, Doctor Dre, and Ed Lover in Mario Van Peebles’s black spaghetti
western, *Gunmen*. Despite these final appearances together, Eric B. & Rakim had left the building.

Naturally, the R had plans to take off on his first solo mission. Over the next few years he would team up with a motley squadron of emerging rap producers, opening his laboratory door to Buckwild, Salaam Remi, and Pete Rock, among others. MCA would eventually release Rakim’s first twelve-inch solo, “Heat It Up,” a rough-hewn jazz binge that appeared on the 1994 soundtrack for *Gunmen*. This was immediately followed by “Murderer (Jeep Version),” remixed by Sly Dunbar, a peppy R&B-tinged revise of Barrington Levy’s dance hall reggae triumph. Both songs went largely unnoticed by the hip hop establishment, as did the later “Shades of Black,” a somber piece of social militancy that was specifically composed for *Pump Ya Fist (Hip Hop Inspired by the Black Panthers)*, a soundtrack to Mario van Peebles’s 1995 movie, *Panther*.

Meanwhile, Eric B. received an even worse reaction to his premier single, “I Can’t Let You,” a love ballad. Image-wise, Eric B. was the absolute antithesis of LL Cool J (Ladies Love Cool James), who established a market for hip hop love songs with “I Need Love” in 1984; the ladies apparently did not love cool B. enough to establish his reputation as a soloist on the charts. The last the world would hear from Eric Barrier would be an unfounded Internet report of his being shot and killed on August 28, 2005, in a barbershop in Camden, New Jersey. While he went on to pursue an executive position with Street Life/All American Records, Eric B. faded into rap legend, hip hop lore, and obscurity. Rakim was at least able to keep the R brand current and on the periphery of the multimillion-dollar urban entertainment market with his singles and a memorable guest appearance on the 1995 final episode of *Yo! MTV Raps*; DJ Scribble juggled an instrumental of EPMD’s “It’s My Thing” as a pole-positioned Rakim gave shots to his new record label, the Last Platoon, and freestyled alongside KRS-One, Erick Sermon, Chubb Rock, and MC Serch. These sporadic recordings and appearances, however, did not return Rakim to his former status as rap god.

**RAKIM’S RETURN**

Rakim’s relative absence and unpopularity in the rap game was but a small thing to a giant as he returned to reclaim his throne in 1997 under new management from his longtime associate and hypeman, Bill Blass. To hip hop aficionados, no revival album has been as hotly anticipated as *The 18th Letter*, a full clip of fourteen songs and three remixes released by Universal Records. The label also released a double CD set containing *The Book of Life*, which included a compendium of Rakim’s greatest hits during a time when Eric B. & Rakim were riding the Soul Train with Don Cornelius;
“I Know You Got Soul” was taped in 1987 and “What’s on Your Mind” and “Don’t Sweat the Technique” in 1992.

For old-school rap fans, the R was the self-prophesied holy redeemer of hip hop, a messianic figure predestined to usher in a renaissance of rap music and a rebirth of the skillworthy MC. Standing atop Mount Sinai in a windswept robe like Black Moses, the R premiered himself to the world in a phantasmagoric Clash of the Titans meets Fellini’s Satyricon video exclusive: “Guess Who’s Back.” The album reached Number One on the U.S. rap charts, yet while critics and fans reacted amicably to a recrudescent Rakim Allah, The 18th Letter was ultimately judged against Rakim’s earlier work with Eric B. & Rakim. During their golden age, Eric B. & Rakim signified the wisdom of actual street knowledge long before N.W.A. co-opted the phrase for Compton. Rakim had envisioned his comeback album as a kind of panacea that would resurrect, heal, and elevate the once intelligently wise and spiritually enlightened mindfulness of golden-age hip hop. After all, it is on The 18th Letter that the R asks the mysterious age-old question: “Who is God?” While he hoped to be eternalized as the first and last conscious MC who introduced spirituality into the rap game, he also wanted his lyrical codification of the streets to be part of his living legacy. Yet rough-and-tumble jewels like “The Saga Begins” from Pete Rock and “New York (Ya Out There)” from DJ Premier were lost among mismatched tracks and incompatible producers. Nevertheless, in their first-ever collaboration, Premier and Rakim deliver a sure-shot contender for best hip hop comeback song: “It’s Been a Long Time.” It was on this cut that Rakim first publicly affirmed that he was no longer down with Eric B. While the R remained lyrically on point throughout his first solo album (he had updated and modernized his narration to include an array of new technological and theological innovations), thematically the album most often found its creator revisiting the ghosts of hip hop past like Just-Ice in “Going Way Back.” Even though The 18th Letter/The Book of Life sold 648,000+ copies, most have been laid to rest in the markdown bins of the used CD store.

The late 1990s would witness the fall of the house that Rakim built, mic by mic and stage by stage. It is difficult to pinpoint the pivotal moment when Rakim began his gradual descent from status as a rap idol. He hooked up with alternative remixologist Danny Saber to record “Take the Train,” which was featured in the children’s film Rugrats: The Movie, and lent his vocals to Art of Noise for a soundtrack album to a film about the life of French composer Claude Debussy that was never made. Neither track registered the slightest blip on the hip hop radar screen. Nevertheless, Rakim’s 1999 donation of his Dapper Dan jacket (as featured on the Follow the Leader LP) to Roots, Rhymes & Rage, the first major exhibition on hip hop culture at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and a guest appearance with infamous Mobb Deep on their video single for the Hoodlum soundtrack, which earned Rakim The Source’s Hip-Hop Quotable of the Month, kept his reputation from flatlining.
Later that same year, Rakim premiered his final full-length LP on Universal Records: *The Master*. Apparently lessons were not learned from the programmatic failings of his first solo CD, as he involved himself with yet another cadre of mismatched producers. Granting that his flow was still masterful, *The Master* seemed more like a jerry-built compilation than a cohesive concept album. And with the new badass arrivistes Sean “Puffy” Combs and Jay-Z reigning over the airwaves with all of the pomp and ghettiquette associated with chasing the Benjamins and living the life of the rich and infamous, Universal Records wanted a more radio-friendly crossover album to market to the cheap-suited heads ever aspiring to be part of the hip-pop beau monde. Rakim thus dedicated this predictable, chorus-overdriven omnibus to the Jigga-set and returned under the guise of a shot-calling papi chulo with a snifter full of artless club bangers. His appearance as a denimed-down rough-neck in the video single for the album, DJ Premier’s “When I Be on the Mic,” is a brief moment of redemption that recalls the halcyon, “I Ain’t No Joke” days of Rakim in his MC prime. Still, one slice of butter out of a baker’s dozen worth of songs does not an album make. And already cynical fans had to come to terms with the dispiriting reality that Rakim was no longer capable of lyrically reinventing the mic.

The R had unwittingly transitioned himself from microphone soloist to microphone collaborationist, involving himself in a surfeit of Marvel-styled team-ups with his contemporaries. On the hip hop front, he partnered with Rahzel on “It’s a Must,” Gang Starr and WC on “The Militia II,” Canibus on “I’ll Buss ’Em U Punish ’Em,” G. Dep and Kool G. Rap on “I Am,” and Japanese producers in residence Nigo and Muro on “Once Upon a Rhyme in Japan”; a partnership was renewed between Rakim and Art of Noise on “(New York London Paris) Spleen” and with Jody Watley on “Off the Hook”; and a first-time reggae venture was embarked upon with Steven Marley on a remix of Bob Marley’s immortal ghetto lament, “Concrete Jungle.” Increasingly relying on the éclat of other producers, rappers, and singers, it seemed ever more apparent that Rakim could no longer handle the whole weight of MCing on the solo slab.

Yet just as the clock struck Y2K, the hip hop world braced for an all-time collaboration of collaborations, one that would rock the new American century: Rakim Allah and Dr. Dre together on an album felicitously titled *Oh My God*. In the previous year, *Blaze* magazine had listed the rapper as number one of the fifty greatest MCs in the history of rap, and listed at number one of the ten greatest producers was Dr. Dre, the so-called inventor and master guardian of the G-Funk soundscape. In interviews, the first producer to hold the Source Awards (and subsequently the Grammy Awards) title Producer of the Year promised fans that supper rappin’ would meet super producin’ on the best rap record Dre ever produced—’nuff said.

As a portent of the album to come, Aftermath Entertainment raised the curtain on Rakim in the hip-pop mainstream with a henna-laced single mixed
and arranged by DJ Quick that featured R&B vixen Truth Hurts and an unwitting Lata Mangeshkar, who would later sue Interscope Records/Universal Music Group (Aftermath’s parent companies) in 2002 for the wanton disrespect of her religion, disregard for her culture, and unsanctioned use of her song, “Thoda Resham Lagta Hai.” With the music video rotating dizzily on MTV and BET and the track itself burning up the Billboard Hot R&B/Hip-Hop singles charts and the Billboard Hot 100, anticipation for Oh My God ran high. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the new-school pharaohs of the millennial rap kingdom, Rakim appeared on Eminem’s 8 Mile soundtrack and guest-starred on Jay-Z’s “The Watcher 2,” lending him increasing exposure and commercial credibility. In spite of these great expectations, the one album that could possibly have bridged the age-old East Coast–West Coast schism would never leave the mix room at Encore Studios and Studio B at Chalice Studios. On July 16, 2003, Oh My God was pronounced DOA in an official statement posted on Rakim.AftermathMusic.com: “The Mic God Rakim has left the Aftermath Camp.”

The official word was issued by Zach Katz, the new manager and marketing hotshot behind Rakim who had transformed the R into a retail powerhouse brand for Hennessy and later Reebok in their Lyrical Classic shoe campaign. After Katz relinquished his managerial role and cited the obligatory “creative differences” as the principle reason for Oh My God’s abortive launch, Rakim boarded a flight and left the City of Angels behind for the Salingerian seclusion of suburban Connecticut. He was characteristically tight-lipped about the matter and would reiterate this nonexplanation in random interviews for three long and relatively unproductive years, during which time he reentered the hip hop limelight on but a few occasions: to model urban wear for Sean John’s Be Legendary promotion, to spit a cappellas of old standards on Russell Simmons’s Def Poetry Jam, to record the relatively unheard-of “Streets of New York”—an import-only, mixtape-bound bonus track featuring Nas and Alicia Keys that marked the first occurrence of the God and his Son blessing the mic in unison—and to appear micless and playing the background in Missy Elliot’s “Cop That Disc” video with Timbaland interpolating a farcical cook-up of Eric B. & Rakim’s “I Know You Got Soul.”

The R would eventually clear the air in 2006 about how, musically, Oh My God was to feature a West Coast production style that was uninspiring to an MC raised on the raucous sample-based productions of Marley Marl, who had always been Rakim’s ideal producer. Rakim much preferred a choice selection of beats that were submitted to Aftermath by DJ Premier, but Premier’s tracks were rejected by the Aftermath staff. Dre himself would claim that many of these beats never reached his desk, and it was rumored that he actually spent minimal time in the studio with Rakim.

It was perhaps unclear from the start if Dr. Dre really envisioned Oh My God as a salute to neo-gangsterism with Rakim picking the guns back up to
celebrate the already overexamined living of hood life. To ensure the album was infused with a new and gratuitously marketable strain of thuggish vim and vigor, Rakim claimed that his pen was guided from on high by Dre and Aftermath staff who pressured him to sling ink on the gangsta tip. And if the ayatollah-orchestrated “A Cold Feeling,” a track tentatively approved by Dre and originally destined to be on his soundtrack for *The Wash*, is any indication of the direction the album was to head lyrically, somebody definitely touched the soldier in Rakim. A chronic-puffing, corner-clocking, cash-snatching, pistol-packing, drive-by-shooting Rakim conducts himself like an honorary member of G-Unit, showing and proving how to live and never die in New York. While the style is evocative of “Juice (Know the Ledge)” hopped up on phencyclidine, Rakim’s steelo was never born to roll. Hence each blustering verse sounds scripted, uncharacteristically hard and knuckle bare. While he maintained mad respect for Dre, it was never Rakim’s intention to sensationalize the often crime-stricken neighborhoods that both supported and inspired his craft for the sake of entertainment.

First and last, Rakim was a socially conscious brother, an epigrammatist whose lyrical mode was that of a poet, a philosopher, an anthropologist, an occultist and, above all, an MC. It was the imponderable sensibilities of the intelligent mind articulated skillfully and not the hair-trigger sensitivities of an ignorant body given to villainy that Rakim wished to inspire his listeners to emulate. It must be noted that the only extant track positively attributable to Dr. Dre himself is “After You Die,” a leaked-out demo featuring a pensive Rakim contemplating the hereafter; the theme is itself an intriguing one as the Eternalist may have been able to slip some imponderables into the mix after all. What life will be and where you go after you die is all too indeterminate, but one thing is certain: The haunting vocals from the hook (seemingly purred by Eartha Kitt) would later find themselves reincarnated by Dre and Aftermath on Busta Rhymes’ recent “Legend of the Fall-offs.” The relationship between Rakim and Dre was anything but sanctified. And Rakim would later jibe that had he known that *Oh My God* would wither and die on the Aftermath vine and his talents would be directed elsewhere.

**THE LEGACY OF ERIC B. & RAKIM**

Rakim Allah is hip hop. The view from behind his microphone was one of a crowd moved by the integrity he brought to the stage. Kool Herc, the founding father of hip hop, said that Rakim set the tone for what hip hop is today. Yet it would take over a decade for the print and broadcast establishment to recognize Rakim’s contributions to the rap idiom. After Blaze magazine knighted Rakim with Greatest of All Time status in 1998, *The Source* became the first periodical to confer five mic recognition upon his achievement as a collective, further awarding Eric B. & Rakim a spot on the Top 115 Artists...
from 1988-2003. To coincide with this fanfare, 4th & Broadway rereleased *Paid in Full* as a two-disc “Platinum Edition.” And as hip hop geared up to hit its thirty-year mark, one album was routinely singled out for high honors and special distinction more than any other in the history of rap discography. The critics were in unanimous agreement: Eric B. & Rakim’s *Paid in Full* (along with *Follow the Leader*) was duly listed in the upper echelons of *The Source*’s 100 Best Rap Albums of All Time, *Rolling Stone*’s 50 Coolest Records and 500 Greatest Albums of All Time, *Spin*’s Top 100 Albums of the Last 20 Years and 100 Top Alternative Albums, and *Vibe* magazine’s 100 Essential Albums of the 20th Century and 51 Albums Representing a Generation, a Sound, and a Movement. *Ego Trip*’s Book of Rap Lists listed the album (along with *Follow the Leader* and *Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em*) among Hip-Hop’s 25 Greatest Albums by Year. Most recently, *Entertainment Weekly* named *Paid in Full* as the Greatest Rap Album, MTV selected it as the single Greatest Hip-Hop Album of All Time and ranked Rakim in the top ten of the Greatest Hip-Hop MCs of All Time; VH1 would follow suit by adding Eric B. & Rakim to the list of 50 Greatest Hip-Hop Artists and bestowing hip hop honors upon Rakim in 2006. But still no hip hop lifetime achievement award for Eric B. & Rakim.

The legacy of *Paid in Full* lives on to the present day as the R inaugurated his third comeback with a gala performance of “Paid in Full” at the B. B. King Blues Club & Grill in New York. After a jam-packed crowd of aged, lip-synching b-boys and rap notables thrust lighters, and cell phones, and electronic organizers into the air to commemorate the recent passing of Mrs. Griffin and the love and brilliance that she inspired, Rakim gave an enthusiastic shout-out to Eric B. and dedicated the song to his former producer. During the show he announced that he would release a new solo album titled *The Seventh Seal*, on his brand-new independent label, Ra Records. The release date was originally set for summer 2006, but Rakim later postponed this date, telling fans that the album would hit stores in Spring 2007. Rakim promised that *The Seventh Seal* would showcase last and for all the lyrical fire and ice that made him the Microphonist. The album itself will literally be of apocalyptic proportions as Rakim responds to the recent spate of inauspicious events afflicting the world today: the geopolitical havoc wrought by global warming and the melting of the polar ice caps, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the invasion of Iraq and the War on Terror, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina. *The Seventh Seal* is set to be produced by the original East Coast Dream Team: Large Professor, Pete Rock, and DJ Premier.

Eric B. & Rakim patented a style of rap that would launch a thousand MCs on a quest to become the new dons and mafiosos of hip hop. Rakim’s flow has long been canonized, his lyrics plagiarized, and his status coveted since he first passed through the door with Eric B. and his melodies. While many rappers acknowledge a debt to Rakim and his vocal, lyrical, and thematical innovations, only an elect one has been skilled enough to be recognized by the
emperor of rap as a lyricist worthy of his court: Nasty Nas, the illmatic MC who was hailed by critics as the second coming of the God. As “God’s Son,” Nas ultimately paid tribute to his namesake and mentor on “U.B.R. (Unauthorized Biography of Rakim)” and would appear on MTV2’s “The Life and Rhymes of . . . Nas” to cover one of Eric B. & Rakim’s greatest hits, “Paid in Full.”

Rakim Allah set the platinum standard for what it really meant to be an MC, a crowd-moving master of ceremonies. For the R, MCing was a vocation strictly reserved for those with a cast-iron will and an imperturbable seriousness of mind. He thought of the microphone as a lethal weapon, and when operated correctly it could shatter the image and reputation of rival MCs. Eric B. & Rakim were not gangsta rappers—the mid-1980s had original gangsta rappers like Schoolly D and Ice-T on their respective East and West Coasts—but Rakim was the first smooth criminal of rap, a lyrical assassin par excellence. Rakim’s rhymes hearken back to the legendary battles in the early days of rap, when skills were tested and reputations were made and unmade by the word manifested in rhyme. Rakim’s earliest influences would include a laundry list of elite warriors that held it down on the front lines of battle-rhyming royals, most notably Grandmaster Melle Mel, Grandmaster Caz, and Kool Moe Dee. For years MC crews like the Furious Five, the Cold Crush Brothers, and the Treacherous Three had battled for supremacy on the city streets and in the public parks of New York City. As an initiate in this tradition of verbal fisticuffs, Rakim was all but duty-bound to harass and murder his nemeses on the other side of the mic.

Rakim’s style is distinguished by his baritone vocal delivery and its sexy, velveteen smoothness. The self-proclaimed Microphonist is methodical as he monotonically delivers verse after slow-pitched verse in deliberate, unflected intonations. Not since Shawn Brown and his eponymous twelve inches of novelty, “Rappin’ Duke,” hit the airwaves in 1984 had rhymes been delivered at such a slow and even-toned velocity. Shortly after Rakim began releasing records, the collective voice of hip hop all but lowered an octave in pitch and scale; listen to King Sun’s “Hey Love,” LL Cool J’s “The Boomin’ System,” and DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince’s “Summertime” for examples of Rakim’s influence. Rakim’s wolf-in-the-night vocal delivery always left his rivals guessing whether he would pounce or just growl idly in the darkness. Nary a stammer nor a stutter would prevent him from hunting down his prey, the ever-elusive Sucker MC. In an effort to stay one mic ahead of the crowd, he would quicken the rate of his delivery. Never at a loss for words, Rakim’s hastened cadence allowed him to pack more verbiage and, by extension, subject matter between each and every four-bar section of his verse. And still, his staccato delivery was nothing less than glacial in its icy coolness, every verse inflected with fistfuls of flavor.

With a predilection for battling, the R brought a quiet ferocity to rap. Many MCs have said that one of the most difficult feats to pull off on the mic is to be equally laid back and charismatic, and only Rakim could sound
coldly inactive and hotly reactive at one and the same rhyme. “I Ain’t No Joke” is a testament to Rakim’s chilled-out, no-nonsense attitude toward rapping. He held up the album title as a catchphrase signifying his prowess on the microphone. Amid a pile-driving Roland TR-808 drum interpolation of Dexter Wansel’s “Theme from the Planets” and brassy, sky-scraping blasts from Fred Wesley and the JBs’ “Pass the Peas” riff scratched briskly over and above the drummed break, Rakim remains calm. He describes himself meditating on the cut like a forensic audiologist, nonchalantly explaining how his vocal stylings are impervious to impersonation. MCs like the notorious 7/21 who would try in vain to replicate Rakim’s style are casually warned that their actions can and will invite serious injury and even death. None but Rakim can lead the unversed through hellfire and back à la Virgil and emerge scatheless and unsmiling without a bead of perspiration. Rakim is no comedian—and “I Ain’t No Joke” would become the stylistic blueprint for what was to come vocally from the R.

At the time, Rakim’s stolid composure was at polar opposites with the chest-pounding, two-fisted vociferations of hard-core rappers like Run-DMC and LL Cool J, whose in-your-face lyricism took on the subtlety of a riot-control megaphone. The Gospel of Rakim spoke for itself, and it would be preached in a mellifluous cadence and most regularly without exclamations. When Eric B. & Rakim released their genre-defining twelve-inch, “My Melody” backed with “Eric B. Is President,” raising hell at 33-1/3 rpm had suddenly and precipitously become démodé.

Yet for all the restraint Rakim brought to the mic, there was an aggressive underlying structure to his raps. He was the first MC to derive a formula for what is universally known today as flow: the rhythmic verbalization of a complex calculus of rhyme. Rakim has long been considered the inventor of compound rhyming, the internalized patterning of single- and multisyllabic words. Throughout the pre-Rakimian era (circa 1978–1985), rhyme couplets were most regularly used as idioms with terminal rhyming words anchored to the end of line phrasings like osmium bookends. This straightforward and inelaborate style of rapping was championed by MCs like Kurtis Blow and Melle Mel, as well as crews like Whodini and the Fat Boys. And with the establishment of flowing as the new lingua franca of the rapping world, Rakim single-handedly founded the new school of rap and kick-started the Golden Age of hip hop (circa 1986–1994). In recent times, the obstreperous Eminem was singled out by Rakim as the new millennial master of flow.

The old-school guard had dropped larger-than-life verses, each one seemingly improvised for the hyperkinetic movement of arm-throwing, hand-waving hip hop crowds. While rappers have always preformulated their raps in some manner, rap music has deep roots in oral traditions and past MCs would pepper their raps with a vast repertory of stock phrases (“Yes, yes, y’all”) that lent the vocalization of their lyrics a live, spontaneous feel—particularly when battles were fought in person, grill-to-grill.
contrast, Rakim was more of an offstage composer than an onstage impro-
visor, and as such he took copious amounts of time to set his rhymes down in
ink and stone. Before he even picked up his Paper Mate, the song was envi-
sioned in its entirety—the thematic structure and narrative direction—and
Rakim most typically wrote his raps from ending to beginning so as to
squeeze every last word and idea into his verses. The rhythmic directions of
his raps were plotted on paper with the skill and accuracy of a cartographer.
As an exercise in linguistics, he would sometimes select sixteen or twenty-four
of the illest words surrounding his concept and build his rap around this
vocabulary. To ensure that his rhyming patterns were always sure-footed,
Rakim devised a kind of metrical templating system whereby the pages of
his jotter were split into three equally spaced columns sectioned off by draw-
ing two parallel lines down each sheet of paper. Rakim appliquéd each in-
dividual section with a paisley-like filigree of vowel-chimes and like-sounding
words that were simultaneously cross-stitched across all three sections to
form an interpenetrating unity of periodic and continuously compounded
rhymes. When he christened his second album *Follow the Leader*, the R
was not merely inducing his listeners to follow the yarns he spun on the
mic—the rhymes themselves were meant to be followed. No MC before
Rakim invested as much time and energy into the stylistic mechanics of rapping. He elevated rap from an improvisational activity to a compositional art.
In other words, he prepared himself for battle.

Rakim at once invented and mastered the science of the written rap. His
invention was anything but elementary. It was a scientific formulation and a
codification of the rap laws of rhyme. To grasp Rakim’s formula (R = MC²),
one must briefly consider his love and understanding of jazz music and his
willful translation of its improvisational melodies and rhythms into vocal
sonorities. Pianists like Thelonious Monk and saxophonists like John Col-
trane would have a profound impact on the R. Monk’s angular, discordant
variations on Asian-derived keyboard phrasing and notation, as showcased in
his “Japanese Folk Song,” and his challenge to conventional Amerocentric
chordal structures held particular resonance for Rakim. He studied the
many ideological expressions of jazz—its technical intricacies of timing and
patterns—and readapted the music’s serpentine phrasings to fit his brave new
scheme of rhyming. Rakim’s rhymes respectively and characteristically mea-
der on, around, and off Eric B.’s sonic backdrops like jazz musicians’ instru-
mentation (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Jazz).

To the same degree that a classically trained musician lays down note
symbols on a staff to indicate pitch and timing, Rakim took the trouble to
csyncopate his rhyme patterning with an almost compulsive precision. His
rhymes connect internally and externally like the intricate and well-fitting
pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. His inner metronome keeps every word quantified
and is seldom if ever off the beat. Throughout his career as an MC, Rakim
associated his rhythmic twists and turns with everything from the aerosolled
Hip Hop and Jazz
Robin Chamberlain

Both jazz and hip hop are more than musical genres: Both are cultural phenomena arising from, and giving voice to, the struggles of African Americans. In addition to being unique musical styles, both incorporate fashion, aesthetics, dance, speech, and graphic representations in communicating the experience of disenfranchised African Americans. It should not be surprising, then, that these two genres have found many points of intersection, giving birth to a new and unique musical form, jazz rap, that continues to evolve as artists from both jazz and hip hop backgrounds produce new and increasingly experimental albums. Originating in the 1980s, jazz rap is often characterized by Afrocentric lyrics that address a wide range of sociopolitical issues. It is also a genre that thrives on experimentation (as do both jazz and hip hop), and, as such, is one of the genres in which the most exciting alternative hip hop has been, and continues to be, produced.

Jazz rap emerged as a distinct genre with the 1988 release of Gang Starr’s "Words I Manifest" and Stetsasonic’s "Talkin’ All That Jazz." These were soon followed by influential offerings from De La Soul, Jungle Brothers, and A Tribe Called Quest. In 1992, jazz legend Miles Davis’s posthumous final album, Doo-Bop, was released, and drew new interest to the genre by its use of hip hop beats and collaborations with MC Easy Mo Bee. Other notable artists combining jazz and hip hop include Nas, the Roots, and MC Soweto Kinch. In 1996, DJ Shadow (aka Josh Davis) pushed the boundaries of the genre even further with his critically acclaimed album Endtroducing . . . , which incorporated not only hip hop and jazz but also rock, soul, funk, and ambient. Since then, jazz rap has become a forum for hip hop artists to explore the boundaries and meaning of the genre, as well as for a more eclectic listening audience to take interest in hip hop as a genre that is, both musically and politically, inherently progressive and malleable.

schematics of graffiti art to the geometric designs and arabesque motifs of Persian rugs. The internal architecture of a Rakim joint is something to aurally behold and his lyricism is best appreciated by peeping “I Know You Got Soul” and “Follow the Leader” without the advantage of musical accompaniment. Once heard a cappella, listeners will truly understand why Sucker MCs would die to get the formula of the R.

See also: Nas, Roxanne Shanté, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg

FURTHER RESOURCES

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Eric B. & Rakim

Let the Rhythm Hit ’Em. MCA Records, 1990.

Rakim

In hip hop history, no group is more emblematic of the purely political than Public Enemy. The group serves as a lens through which to survey the history of rap, past and present, sketch its broad strokes, chart its highs and lows, and above all map its relation to the political mainstream of the United States. What may come as a surprise given the legendary status the group enjoys is the relatively apolitical nature of Public Enemy’s early work, the result of having to work without a blueprint to craft a new genre of explicitly political rap.
Their rise from the relative obscurity of Long Island to massive popularity and political controversy in the early 1990s, and their return to a degree of obscurity thereafter, tells us much about the history of hip hop and particularly about the fate of the specific political project that Public Enemy would come to promote through their music.

EARLY YEARS: FROM THE 'VELT TO SPECTRUM CITY

Chuck D was born Carlton Douglas Ridenour on August 1, 1960, in Flushing, Queens, to a radical family. He moved as a young child to Queensbridge, later home to such artists as Marley Marl’s Juice Crew, Nas, and Mobb Deep, before settling at the age of eleven in Roosevelt, Long Island (later to be affectionately called “the ‘Velt,” Strong Island). Relocating to Roosevelt would prove crucial to Chuck D’s development, as he recalls the surprisingly large black population and a well-organized community, as well as the proximity to such institutions of higher learning as Hofstra and Adelphi Universities, which offered radical summer courses for young blacks taught by Black Panthers and members of the Nation of Islam, among others. Although they had yet to meet, two other future members of the broader Public Enemy circle—Professor Griff and Hank Shocklee—also attended the same summer programs, and it was Chuck D’s inspiring experience there that would influence him, after graduating in 1979 from Roosevelt High, to enroll at Adelphi.

Shortly after beginning his studies at Adelphi, Chuck D waited in line at a party for a chance to rap on the mic, and was approached afterward by Harlem-born Hank Shocklee. Born James Henry Boxley III, Shocklee was a founder of the well-known DJ outfit Spectrum City, which despite its popularity conspicuously lacked MCs to hype the crowd. Shocklee invited Chuck to join the crew, which would later evolve into the legendary production crew the Bomb Squad, consisting of Hank’s brother Keith Shocklee, Bill Stephney, Carl Ryder (Chuck D’s producer alias), and Eric “Vietnam” Sadler, who would collectively provide the notorious sonic backing for Public Enemy.

Hank and Keith Shocklee were born to a family whose savvy united the musical and the electronic: a crucial combination during the early years of hip hop, and especially prophetic for future Bomb Squad members. Hank’s musical influences were drawn from across the spectrum, and he recalls that during his formative years, rock would win out over the funk and jazz to which he had been exposed as a child. His attachment to the raw energy, drive, and overt delivery of 1970s rock would foreshadow the music Hank would mastermind in later years. But funk would make a comeback. After hearing a neighbor plug turntables into a local band’s PA system, Hank remembers how amplification gave funk an entirely new energy. Shocklee would go on to produce an intricate fusion of these two elements—electrified
rock and amplified funk—the two most fundamental ingredients of what would become the Bomb Squad sound.

It was from this very same amplification technique that the Spectrum Sound System was born. Originally billed as a “radio station,” Hank and Keith would basically drag their speakers and mismatched turntables around to play impromptu shows by plugging the tables into the microphone jacks on the speakers. During the next few years, Spectrum would engage in a variety of DJing activities—spinning records as diverse as disco, rock, and Kraftwerk at venues as diverse as parties and wedding receptions—as well as recording and selling mixtapes and hyping new hip hop. Chuck D describes Hank’s genius during these early years as simultaneously technological and acoustic—a reflection of his early influences—and Hank elaborates on this by noting that despite the power of his sound system during those early Spectrum years, balance was the key, setting him apart from legends like Kool Herc: “I would make sure that my crossover frequencies—I would make sure that my bass, everything, was working in tune with each other, and I made sure that I covered the entire frequency spectrum” (Lapeyre 123). Spectrum was a fitting name for the operation.

It was during the course of his work with Spectrum that Chuck D would become acquainted with Hank’s brother Keith Shocklee, and after seeking out contacts at Adelphi’s radio station WBAU, he would also connect with Bill Stephney, whose Monday night show eventually came to be closely associated with Spectrum and immensely popular among Strong Islanders. The Spectrum Show on WBAU appeared around the same time that their work at parties was on the decline as lack of profitability had resulted in the closure of several key venues, and the Spectrum crew turned the production talents of the embryonic Bomb Squad toward the direct recording of new and previously unheard artists for exclusive play on WBAU. It was during the course of one such recording session that Chuck D would be introduced to another central member of P.E.: Flavor Flav, born William Jonathan Drayton Jr. on March 16, 1959, in Roosevelt. Flav was trained as a classical pianist and had attended a different high school than Chuck D before also enrolling at Adelphi. Shortly after meeting Chuck, then program director Stephney gave Flav his own show right before Spectrum, under the moniker MC DJ Flavor.

During these years, Chuck D considered himself more of an MC than a rapper, but the temptation to make records was ever present, and he soon came to recognize the need to record, especially if he wanted to break into the rap scene from the relative obscurity of Long Island. And Hank Shocklee’s encouragement didn’t hurt, either: Hank would listen to the entire line of amateur rappers who lined up for the mic at Spectrum parties, before realizing that Chuck’s brief interventions as an MC—in a booming baritone borrowed from sports announcer Marv Albert—were more compelling than any of the rappers. It would take nearly a year for Hank to convince the introverted Chuck D—a description bearing little relation to his later front man

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persona—to start rapping. After Chuck had released a couple of records with the dual aim of demonstrating his skills and hyping the *Spectrum Show*—including the underground 1984 hit “Check Out the Radio,” released as a B side to “Lies”—Flav told Chuck that another local rapper wanted to battle him. Since the two were working together for Chuck’s father at the time, they rehearsed a response together, and in the end Chuck invited Flavor Flav to join him on what would be their first joint recording. The track would bear a prophetic name, originally meant to express Chuck’s surprise at being targeted for a battle: “Public Enemy No. 1.”

**THE BOMB SQUAD’S SONIC BOOM**

It was during the course of these early recording experiments that the classic Bomb Squad sound would emerge in embryonic form. At one point, Hank approached Larry Smith and Russell Simmons to produce beats for Spectrum, hoping to recreate what he perceived to be the best aspects of the Run-DMC and Kurtis Blow sound. What it was that Hank appreciated about Smith and Simmons’s production sheds some light on where the early Spectrum sound was coming from: They were musicians, but unlike most musicians they kept it minimal. This frustration with musicians that drove Hank’s vision of rap production would become central to the Public Enemy sound, but only through a certain degree of productive tension with the Bomb Squad’s own musician: Eric “Vietnam” Sadler.

Sadler entered the picture because Smith and Simmons declined to produce Spectrum. Hank had moved his equipment into the same Hempstead studio shared by Sadler, and since Sadler was the most approachable musician around from a hip hop perspective, Hank asked him to fill out the sought-after Kurtis Blow sound. Vietnam declined at first, but after a year of meager income as a musician, he agreed to work with the Spectrum crew, and his first contribution came on the 1984 “Check Out the Radio” single. This was only the beginning, and it was in the context of what some perceived as a lukewarm response to that single that Hank and Eric would begin to reformulate their sound. Vietnam was the only one who knew how to use the drum machines and samplers, so this reformulation consisted of Hank and Chuck describing the sounds they wanted and Sadler attempting to recreate them electronically.

And Sadler also had to be disabused of some bad habits, specifically, a too affectionate relation to Prince and the eighties sound more generally. The vaccine was the 808. The Roland TR-808 drum machine, released in late 1980 and immediately considered by many to be an inferior machine, had an infamously artificial sound, but its biggest selling points were a relatively low price and a classic kick drum sound. It was largely as a result of this kick drum, and the artists like Public Enemy who venerated it, that the popularity of the 808 would skyrocket later in the 1980s, well after Roland had ceased production of the early device. Hank told Eric Sadler, “*This* is your
fuckin’ God. This is in every fuckin’ record. If you don’t do anything in life, you put this shit in there, and it’s a fuckin’ smash” (Lapeyre 128). Through Eric with his 808 and Hank with an increasingly massive collection of samples, the Bomb Squad sound began a slow and often painful process of development and refinement, a process that spanned three years and two albums.

In 1985, the Spectrum Show on WBAU came to an end, as its participants felt that it had reached a limit, and specifically that it wasn’t paying off financially. Chuck was also being actively courted by Rick Rubin at the upstart label Def Jam, which had already signed Original Concept, the Beastie Boys, and LL Cool J. Spectrum continued to do live gigs, and it was around this time that Chuck was reintroduced to another crucial member of what would become Public Enemy: Professor Griff, born Richard Griffin on the same day as Chuck D. The two had known one another in Roosevelt during their younger years, but after joining the army and learning martial arts Griff returned to Roosevelt to found the local black security organization Unity Force, which had provided security for the ’Velt’s hip hop scene, often working at Spectrum shows.

Chuck and Hank finally consented to a deal with Def Jam in June 1986—what they would later deem “the great surrender”—inspired largely by the commercial success of Run-DMC and the feeling that the mainstream rap game needed some conscious players in (Chuck D 82-83). Even then, however, Chuck only envisioned himself as operating behind the scenes as a manager, but after some pressure from Rubin, he agreed to be front man for the newly renamed Public Enemy. Despite label pressure to remain a solo rapper, Chuck D immediately began to assemble a crew in the mold of Grandmaster Flash’s Furious Five. He first approached Flavor (with significant resistance from Rubin) and then Spectrum DJ Mellow D, whom Chuck D immediately granted the less-than-mellow title “Terminator X.” Griff was next, whose Unity Force was immediately recast as Security of the First World (S1W), which according to Chuck D’s vision represented a rejection of the alleged third world status of blacks.

While the lineup had been formalized, and while the moniker Public Enemy had finally been selected (at the suggestion of Hank Shocklee), it is worth bearing in mind that the name still referred to Chuck D’s original resistance to battle rapping. Moreover, while Terminator X and S1W had been incorporated into the group, this was still initially for aesthetic reasons, backed up by a hazy political agenda. Indeed, Chuck D recalls that the political significance of the name Public Enemy came only after it had been chosen, but this isn’t to say that they were apolitical. Bill Stephney suggests that part of the reason the group adopted the name Public Enemy was their growing realization—in the aftermath of the 1986 Howard Beach incident, the 1983 killing of graffiti artist Michael Stewart by New York transit cops, and Bernhard Goetz’s 1984 shooting of four unarmed black teens on the subway—that “the Black male is definitely the public enemy,” a recognition which formed the basis of the group’s later radicalization (Chang 247).
BUM RUSHING THE SHOW, A YEAR LATE

Chuck D locates the official emergence of Public Enemy between two microeras within the history of rap. First came the old-school period epitomized by Grandmaster Flash, Kurtis Blow, and Afrika Bambaataa, which was followed by a second period—between 1984 and 1986—dominated by LL Cool J, Run-DMC, and others. But in 1987 the rap game changed again, ushering in a third era, as Rakim and KRS-One broke the preexisting lyrical mold. This vocal innovation, epitomized by Rakim’s intricate and jazz-inspired rhyming, broke with the regular and simplistic meter, flow, and emphasis of earlier rap, which remained rooted in the Jamaican tradition of toasting. Chuck recalls that Yo! Bum Rush the Show was made in the outmoded 1986 style, and this simplistic meter and flow would remain visible on tracks like “Timebomb.”

The reason for the outmoded character of the album was the slow production schedule of Def Jam, then distributed by major label Columbia, as Chuck D recalls that “major record companies move big-time, but they move like dinosaurs” (Chuck D 86). By the time the single “Public Enemy No. 1” was released in February 1987, its original incarnation was nearly two years old, and the rerecorded version had existed for more than six months. The album was made in the 1986 style because it was made in 1986, but not released until 1987. Learning their lesson from this, Public Enemy’s next hit single was not reserved for their follow-up album. Instead, going over the head of Russell Simmons, they released “Rebel Without a Pause” as the B side for Bum Rush’s “You’re Gonna Get Yours.” “Rebel” was recorded in a week and released less than two weeks later, which meant that the first track from Public Enemy’s second album was released less than two months after their first record finally saw the light of day. This did the trick: “Rebel Without a Pause” blew up, and this was the break that Public Enemy needed.

What characterized this early sound that had become so outdated by 1987 can be gauged by taking a closer look at the stylistic differences that characterized Yo! Bum Rush the Show and the 1988 release It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, for which P.E. is best remembered, and for which the “Rebel Without a Pause” B side served as a prelude. The earlier album showed a less than fully matured Bomb Squad, which combined with the influence of Rick Rubin to give a much more minimalist sound, more evocative of LL Cool J and the Beastie Boys than the heavily layered Bomb Squad sound that would emerge a year later. The early Bum Rush sound emerged from the chaotic process by which Eric Sadler sought to translate Hank Shocklee and Chuck D’s demands into music, and this process of translation was not limited to the internal dynamics of the Bomb Squad, as Sadler would often find it necessary to translate these unsystematic demands for oblivious sound engineers, some of whom flatly refused to participate in the Bomb Squad’s unorthodox production techniques.
Neither process was painless, but it was precisely this discomfort that would make the Public Enemy sound so profoundly inimitable, as this external tension reflected an aesthetic conflict inside the Bomb Squad. This tension often revolved around the opposition between Hank’s desire for “offness” and Eric’s tendency to seek “musical resolution”: While Hank was raising and lowering levels to create imperfection and prevent sterility, adding “frequencies that push and pull against each other,” Eric would be doing the opposite in an effort to smooth out the track. Hank even recalls looping at two and a quarter bars in order to disrupt the track’s closure by creating an infinite-sounding loop, a technique most conspicuous on tracks like the “Mind Terrorist” interlude. The clash between the two was not balanced, however, since Hank was still the boss, the brain, and the “rugged rebelness that goes in when something sounds like ‘I don’t give a fuck’” won out over the closed circle of resolution (Lapeyre 128). “Music’s worst nightmare,” as Hank so often described it, defeated the musician.

At the time that Bum Rush was constructed, this production process had yet to fully develop, and one clear difference that distinguishes the album is the prevalence of recorded music, which Chuck D recalls as having constituted more than half of the album. Eric would even play live drums before overlaying them with a complicated and never-repeating drum pattern. After the basic elements of the track were laid down, Chuck would then formulate his contribution, before the Bomb Squad tweaked the sound and added samples and scratching. Since Terminator X was still more of a party DJ, Johnny “Juice” Rosado was enlisted to add the complicated cutting and scratching, and it is often argued that Rosado never got enough credit for his contribution. Moreover, few recognize that much of the scratching was done by Chuck himself after the other DJs had gone home for the night. The DJs were also enlisted in Hank’s quest for offness, as he recalls that “Rightstarter,” his favorite track on the album, sounded too good, too clean in its original incarnation, so he took out the kick drum and had Rosado scratch it back in. But this was all the final step: The Bomb Squad would map it out, Chuck would add his vocals, and then Flavor and Terminator X would come in and perform their largely preconceived parts.

Like the Bomb Squad sound, Chuck D’s rhyming was also in transition, booming loudly but not erasing entirely an earlier party MC mentality. While political themes such as references to South African apartheid and the Black Panthers gain mention on “Timebomb,” these were backgrounded to the sort of battle rapping and playful boasting that played more prominent roles on tracks such as “Public Enemy No. 1” and “You’re Gonna Get Yours.” Flavor Flav’s contribution, moreover, differs considerably from his later-developed persona. While the interplay of “the treble” (Flav) and “the bass” (Chuck) was beginning to develop, we also see a serious side to Flav on “Too Much Posse,” and the heavy filtering of the album’s vocals further diminishes the contrast between the vocalists (see sidebar: Hype Men).
Public Enemy was invited, in the aftermath of the release of *Bum Rush*, to join the Beastie Boys on tour, the beginning of which coincided with the release of “Rebel Without a Pause” in April 1987. The group was then invited to join headliners LL Cool J and Eric B. & Rakim on an infamous European tour toward the end of 1987, during which LL was booed off stage and Eric B. & Rakim got sick of the food and tour conditions and left. Public Enemy, however, was extremely well received, and much of their international popularity can be attributed to this early breakout opportunity.

**IT TAKES A MILLION SAMPLES**

Public Enemy dropped the epic *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* in April 1988 to much critical acclaim, before joining Run-DMC on yet another European tour at the end of the same year. Given the swift and radical transformation that the group had undergone since the production of *Bum Rush the Show*, it is perhaps of little surprise that the success of *Nation of Millions* (considered one of the most influential albums of all time by VH1, *Spin*, and *Rolling Stone*) has condemned P.E.’s first release to an undeserved oblivion. It would be the combined maturity of Bomb Squad production and Chuck’s political vision that would make *Nation of Millions* literally the centerpiece, and indeed the turning point, in the history of Public Enemy.
“Rebel Without a Pause” ushered in this era of Public Enemy’s perfection, or to put it more accurately, their imperfection. “Rebel” was recorded with an early Mirage sampler, which could only capture three-second samples, resulting in a split-second delay between sample and track. This sort of imperfection was music to Hank Shocklee’s ears. Moreover, it was on “Rebel” that Terminator X’s potential began to appear. After hearing the initial track, Hank was disappointed by the muddy sound of the scratching, so he asked the engineer to “pull off the bottom” of the track. This did the trick: “the whole shit popped out like crazy, and it was my favorite piece . . . I thought that was probably the most brilliant piece of scratchwork on a record, ever” (Lapeyre 134). While Chuck was still adding some “ol’ fucked-up shit . . . at three in the morning” and DJ Juice contributed some “fast cutting,” Terminator X’s role was now more befitting of his image.

“Rebel” was released well before the rest of Nation of Millions was even recorded, but before heading back to the studio, the Bomb Squad would make a slightly unexpected detour. Hank realized in 1987 that Slick Rick—already a legend from such hits as 1985’s “La-Di-Da-Di” and “The Show”—was still on the back burner at Def Jam and had not yet recorded an album. It was the Bomb Squad running the machines that produced the 1988 The Great Adventures of Slick Rick, and once we recall Eric Sadler’s role in the Bomb Squad—often muted but central nonetheless—we can begin to feel Hank behind the scenes, letting Eric’s musical side flourish in the extended bass solo on “Teenage Love.”

Back in the studio later that year to back up “Rebel” with a full follow-up album, the Bomb Squad had reached its peak. As Eric Sadler recalls, “Nation was the only album that the so-called Bomb Squad worked on as a whole together” (Lapeyre 135). The process was intensive, all the more so since the album was completed in less than a month. The process was the following: The Bomb Squad would come up with a basic idea, a basic beat in the preproduction stage. Once in the studio, the first step was to see what Chuck had come up with lyrically, to lay the lyrics down, and then to take a new perspective—involving a sort of hip hop cubism—on what the finished project should look like. As “Vietnam” Sadler explains, the next step was the crucial ingredient to the new formula: “Then Hank and Keith would come in. It’s like, a’ight, now we’re gonna fuck this up . . . basically, they’d take it apart and then we would slap it back together and I would just put stuff in place” (Lapeyre 134). The final ingredients, as with the first album, would be the scratching by Juice and Terminator and Flavor Flav’s vocal contributions, but it was in the all-too-crucial “fucking it up” stage that the Bomb Squad would develop a trademark sampling style.

A crucial ingredient in what Hank Shocklee describes as “music’s worst nightmare” was the heavy layering of equally heavy samples. In Nation of Millions, the predominant source would be James Brown—whose importance Hank Shocklee attributes to a “jungle grit,” an “ability to tap into deep
African rhythms” and “create a frenzy”—and who found himself featured on exactly half of the tracks on the album. These samples were drawn from five classic tracks (Allen 72). Indeed, the break from Brown’s “Funky Drummer”—one of the most heavily sampled songs of all time—was included on three tracks (and would later find its way onto “Fight the Power”). Later, some would attribute the decline of the Bomb Squad in part to new legal requirements for clearing samples, which rendered the use of material from legends like James Brown too costly an endeavor, a problem the group anticipated on “ Caught, Can We Get a Witness?”

This prevalence of sampling was in itself a significant departure from Bum Rush, on which the sparse musical samples were generally looped and pushed into the background (as with the Neville Brothers sample on “Timebomb” or the JB’s on “Public Enemy No. 1”). This was a result of the second shift engendered by KRS-One and Eric B. & Rakim’s 1987 interventions. Chuck D recalls that it was the latter’s “I Know You Got Soul” that “flipped it for good,” a track which is often considered unique for the isolation of a James Brown sample, and which some claim single-handedly kicked off the era of “godfather rap” (Chuck D 86). Moreover, Chuck also cites KRS-One’s “South Bronx” as another transitional track, and it was on the latter that Public Enemy’s own transition would be explicitly modeled: “We started [‘Rebel Without a Pause’] the same way that KRS’s ‘South Bronx’ started off with the ‘Get Up Off of That Thing’ by James Brown” (Chuck D 91). James Brown was a crucial ingredient to the new Bomb Squad sound—“James Brown is the main course. Other samples are the flavoring”—and in this Public Enemy was in many ways a product of the times (Allen 72).

But the uniqueness of the Bomb Squad’s new sound consisted of more than an increased sample density: The character of the flavoring was vital. These samples were to make up part of a complex tapestry of sounds, alongside the random sounds, sirens, and rock guitars featured on Bum Rush. In a recent interview, Bomb Squad guru Hank Shocklee recalls, “I just wanted to take the sampling and OD [overdose] on it. You know, I wanted to use it so much that you didn’t know what anything was and where things was coming from” (Welte). Soul samples were deeply enmeshed with heavy metal samples—Slayer’s “Angel of Death” appears on “She Watch Channel Zero?!”—as well as a myriad of other unidentifiable sounds. The Bomb Squad would even record themselves simultaneously playing a chaotic array of sounds in the studio, before listening to the playback and lifting out a sample that had struck just the right combination of frequencies. Such techniques created a collage effect that has been described as a “wall of noise” or “sonic wall” within which Chuck D’s fuller and by now less filtered baritone pounds the listener into submission like “the voice of God in a storm,” in the words of Hank Shocklee (Warrell).

The contrast between Bum Rush and Nation of Millions goes beyond the merely aesthetic, as the latter would mark the emergence of Public Enemy’s
trademark brand of political critique: As production was revolutionized, so too was P.E.’s politics. It was this element more than even the album’s innovative production that made it a landmark for a generation of fans and which marked the emergence of the first wave of truly political rap. The album turns to more political sampling: Jesse Jackson is summoned to begin “Rebel Without a Pause,” and the ostensible interlude “Show Em Whatcha Got” references an entire lineage of black radicals, from Marcus Garvey to Steve Biko, Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King, and of course Nelson Mandela.

These samples provide the background for a new Chuck D, one rarely glimpsed on Bum Rush, who lays out the group’s dual political heritage, from the Black Panthers to the Nation of Islam (especially on “Party for Your Right to Fight”), as well as the spirit of revolt embodied by Nat Turner. Further, Chuck D repeatedly claims federal complicity in the deaths of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, dismisses mainstream television as brainwashing, and issues stinging critiques of Oliver North, J. Edgar Hoover, and Margaret Thatcher, as well as the prison-military complex, for which he coins the memorable term “anti-nigger machine.” These various strands of political critique come together in the video for “Night of the Living Baseheads,” which rap critic and historian Tricia Rose sees as a “visual, symbolic, and conceptual tour de force,” embodying the essence of Public Enemy and “the tension between postmodern ruptures and the continuities of oppression” (115). Public Enemy had finally earned the self-imposed title of “prophets of rage.”

Moreover, Chuck goes out of his way on Nation of Millions to defend NOI leader Louis Farrakhan and then presidential candidate Jesse Jackson, both of whom had recently come under attack for anti-Semitism (see sidebar: Anti-Semitism in Rap). This defense of Farrakhan and Jackson would prove prophetic of the rage of others as well, and Public Enemy would soon find themselves embroiled in their own controversy over anti-Semitism, one that would irrevocably transform both the internal dynamics of the group and its public reception.

Anti-Semitism in Rap

George Ciccariello-Maher

Currents within hip hop often mirror broader trends within the black community, and the sometimes-justified accusation of anti-Semitism often leveled against rap is no exception. This is often due to the fact that incidents of alleged anti-Semitism often have the same sources in both. For example, the controversy that engulfed and in many ways destroyed Public Enemy cannot be understood without reference to the similar controversies surrounding Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, and without grasping certain tenets of black thought, most specifically those of black Muslims.

Often, accusations of anti-Semitism involve broader disagreements about history, the present situation in the Middle East, and the relation between the
two: Many in the black community have long maintained a clear sympathy with the Arab cause (as a result of both ethnic and religious ties) and have moreover challenged the singularity of the Jewish Holocaust by drawing attention to earlier experiences of colonialism and the black holocaust of American slavery. In 1994, a report by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting made note of the double standard to which rappers are held, especially on questions of anti-Semitism, pointing out that during the Public Enemy controversy, similarly offensive comments by the lead singer of Guns N’ Roses were largely ignored.

Even the conscious rapper Mos Def courted controversy by referring to a “tall Israeli” who’s “runnin’ this rap shit” on his 2004 track “The Rape Over.” Mos Def insists that the line was a direct reference to current Warner Brothers CEO and former CEO of Island/Def Jam Lyor Cohen, whose parents were Israeli immigrants, and that hence the statement was not anti-Semitic. Regardless, the line was eventually removed from the album’s second pressing under pressure from executives, ostensibly due to difficulties clearing samples. More recently, at the 2005 Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, rap mogul Russell Simmons reacted angrily to demands by the Anti-Defamation League that rappers publicly renounce the Nation of Islam, citing the organization’s long history of defending the black community.

THE INFAMOUS GRIFF

At a meeting in 1988, up-and-coming film director Spike Lee asked Chuck D to write an anthem for his next project, Do the Right Thing. Through Lee, moreover, Chuck came into contact with the head of Motown, which had recently been acquired by MCA, and he, Hank Shocklee, and Bill Stephney were offered their own subsidiary record label under MCA. Chuck promised to deliver the track for Lee upon returning from the Run-DMC tour, and it was on a series of flights criss-crossing Europe and Japan that he would return to an old Isley Brothers favorite and pen the lyrics for P.E.’s most influential track of all time: “Fight the Power.” Chuck recalls being surprised at the prominence that “Fight the Power” was given in Do the Right Thing, at the fact that the song and the film essentially merged into one, and this prominence certainly contributed to P.E.’s newfound stardom.

Chuck found inspiration for the track by reflecting on the disparity between the “heroes” of black and white culture, and this spurred him to write the infamous third verse of the song, which denounces Elvis Presley and John Wayne as racists, before summing the issue up with the observation that, “most of my heroes don’t appear on no stamps.” The song opens with one of the few of these heroes to actually make it onto a stamp, Martin Luther King, and production on the track epitomized the classic Bomb Squad sound: “begin [ning] with a pow, crashing like a fist against the senses” as “alarms sound
Do the Right Thing opened at the end of June 1989 and catapulted Public Enemy into the spotlight. But they were headed to the spotlight regardless, due to a now-infamous interview that Public Enemy’s “Minister of Information” Professor Griff had given only a month earlier. Griff had made some mention on BET of a connection between “Jews” and “jewelry,” and Washington Times reporter David Mills wanted to discuss the comments with the rest of the group. Chuck was busy with other interviews, and so made the decision—unfortunate in retrospect—to have Griff deal with Mills himself. The interview didn’t go well, as Griff told Chuck afterward. Griff repeated the claims about jewelry, and cited the fact that the head of the De Beers mining dynasty is Jewish. Mills was even more bothered and scheduled a follow-up meeting. Chuck wasn’t feeling conciliatory and again decided to skip out on the meeting to handle other business.

In this second interview, Mills spoke at length with other S1Ws and members of the P.E. entourage. Neglecting the fact that it was the very premise rather than historical detail that reproduced the circular logic of anti-Semitism, they attempted to provide historical substantiation for Griff’s claims by citing among other things the heavily discredited (and NOI-published) book The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews. As the story goes, this meeting was going reasonably well until Griff himself appeared, demanding the tape from his original interview to ensure that he wouldn’t be misquoted. This provoked an altercation with Mills, who became angry and left, publishing his story as is in the Times. The original story was then commented upon in late June by the Village Voice, and the two articles would produce an unprecedented backlash against the group. It is worth mentioning that Chuck D recalls that Mills later regretted having published the article immediately without doing more research into the matter first, and that he subsequently offered an apology to Griff himself.

Chuck takes most of the responsibility for the controversy, identifying a series of moments in which he could have intervened but chose not to: He could have intervened in either of the Griff interviews, and above all he could have intervened in the brewing controversy rather than waiting for it to disappear. Instead, the fight was brought to him, not from critics, but from the industry and even from some friends: “They couldn’t fuck with us directly, so what they did was to go after everybody around us. . . . They were fucking with Russell at Def Jam, messing with the MCA [label] negotiations, and fucking with Spike Lee” (Chuck D 228). The issue “festered into a mushroom cloud by the end of June,” the same time that Do the Right Thing appeared, and Chuck realized that something needed to be done. But his final mistake was the press conference he organized, in which he read a prepared statement that had been approved by Stephney and Def Jam publicist Bill Adler without consulting Griff or the other S1Ws, which declared that Griff was no longer with the group.
THE BOMB SQUAD, DEFUSED

Chuck’s reflections on the uproar would be committed to vinyl later that year when the group recorded the controversial “Welcome to the Terrordome” in October 1989, the second track (after “Fight the Power”) for their third album, *Fear of a Black Planet*, which would appear the following spring. This track, Hank Shocklee recalls, came out of a track released in the same year by Brooklyn-based Full Force titled “Ain’t My Type of Hype,” and this explains why the track was produced prior to the remainder of *Fear of a Black Planet*. Hank recalls hearing the Full Force track for the first time while driving, and becoming so excited that he needed to stop: “It was like, ‘Yo this is crazy! But they didn’t finish it!’ . . . I turned around, went back to our studio: ‘I’m gon’ put this shit together.’ I took what they did, added some extra stuff, changed it around: ‘Terrordome’” (Lapeyre 135).

The Bomb Squad would then spend a couple of months producing albums for other acts—including Bell Biv DeVoe’s *Poison*, which sold more than 4 million copies, as well as Ice Cube’s epic solo debut *AmerikKKka’s Most Wanted*, which topped rap charts and remains among the most influential rap albums of all time—before returning to the studio for Public Enemy’s equally epic third album. As Chuck D recalls, the team had effectively produced three number-one albums in a span of only fourteen weeks, between January and March 1990. But this was no longer the same Bomb Squad that it had been only a year earlier.

By the time P.E. got into the studio to put together *Fear of a Black Planet*, irreparable rifts had emerged within the organization, mostly as a result of the Griff controversy and Chuck D’s reaction to it. Sadler recalls that the split was between Hank Shocklee and Bill Stephney on the one hand, and Chuck D and Keith Shocklee on the other, and that the latter pair began to work on *Fear of a Black Planet* while the others were still putting together Bell Biv DeVoe. Upon hearing some of what Keith and Chuck had come up with, Sadler remembers becoming depressed and deciding to help out on the album. In the end, even with Sadler’s intervention, the absence of the mastermind, the brain, proved too difficult to overcome. *Fear of a Black Planet* remains a classic and the most commercially successful of Public Enemy’s albums, but its status would be driven largely by the unforgettable impact of “Fight the Power,” as well as the album’s lead single, “Welcome to the Terrordome,” both of which can be seen as leftovers from Public Enemy’s prior era, in which Hank Shocklee fully controlled the reins of production and masterminded the intricate combination of elements that had constituted the Bomb Squad sound. In the end, the album lacked all the pieces.

And the recent Griff controversy didn’t help the situation. In the year that had passed, the outcry had died down a bit, but we can be sure that Public Enemy’s critics were prepared to resume the attack if necessary. The release of the
“Terrordome” single, in the words of one reviewer, “catapulted Public Enemy into the unenviable position of being the most scrutinized group in pop music,” and critics would go over Fear’s lyrics with a fine-toothed comb (Watrous). But the group’s detractors only needed to look as far as the lead single, and “Welcome to the Terrordome,” which was written as a response to the Griff controversy, soon generated a controversy of its own. In a discussion of the attacks leveled against the group for anti-Semitism, Chuck D concludes with the line, “Still they got me like Jesus.” To speak of crucifixion at the hands of the press is of course commonplace—and according to Chuck, this is all that was meant—but when the attacks are coming from Jewish organizations, doing so inevitably runs the risk of echoing the historical claim of Jewish complicity in the crucifixion.

There is little doubt that the rift introduced by the Griff controversy was a determining factor in the effective dissolution of the Bomb Squad and the consequent decline of Public Enemy as a significant force in rap. Hank Shocklee, putting a positive spin on the situation, nevertheless insists that the group had accomplished its purpose and reached its limits as a creative project. This belief was additionally influenced by the impending deal by which the remaining members of the Bomb Squad would be offered a deal by MCA to found SOUL Records. The original production team was to have consisted of Hank and Keith Shocklee, Bill Stephney, Chuck D, and Eric Sadler, but with tangible disappointment, Eric recalls the moment at which Hank essentially dismissed him and Keith, moving forward with Stephney and Chuck.

Hank’s justification for this gesture lies in the claim that Public Enemy had gotten too big too quickly and that it would self-destruct if he didn’t intervene to preemptively dissolve the group. Regardless of whether or not this was the case, Keith and Eric decided to leave the picture for their own reasons, and after Chuck backed out to take the heat off the SOUL deal in the aftermath and reignition of the Griff controversy, the Bomb Squad era had been definitively ended. While Public Enemy has continued to make music since then, and indeed up to the present day, it had already lost one of its central ingredients by 1990. After that point, the group would require a total renovation, a task all the more difficult in the face of a hostile media keen on highlighting the slightest political impropriety or artistic shortcoming.

PUBLIC ENEMY STRIKES BLACK?

This renovation would go on display in late 1991, with the release of Apocalypse ’91 . . . The Enemy Strikes Black. The response from critics was positive but muted, with many sensing in the music the growing dissension within the group as well as a certain repetitiveness of political themes. As a result of the breakdown of the Bomb Squad, the latter was elevated on Apocalypse to
executive production status, whereas in practice the beats were made by Bomb Squad disciples Gary G-Wiz and the Imperial Grand Ministers of Funk. What made a bigger difference, according to Hank Shocklee, was Chuck D’s occupation of the position of sonic mastermind: Chuck, according to Hank, is not a musical genius, and his control over the process since Apocalypse has led to a lower quality sound on the more recent records.

Politically, however, some consider Apocalypse to be more on point than ever, having moved beyond the “integrationist sentimentalizing” of Fear of a Black Planet (Henderson 328). While the sound had changed, tracks like “Can’t Truss It” and “Shut Em Down” still bring the message, and both are backed up by black-and-white videos that compare capitalism to slavery, celebrate past resistance, and exhort future rebellion. The album also contains the classic “By the Time I Get to Arizona,” an attack on Evan Mecham, the former governor of that state, who had created a political furor by refusing to observe Martin Luther King Day in Arizona. The P.E. video depicts armed S1Ws storming the governor’s offices and closes with Mecham’s car exploding.

Despite this, from the perspective of public reception Apocalypse marked the beginning of a slow decline. It is always a risky endeavor to privilege one moment of an artist’s work over another, but it is equally undeniable that Public Enemy’s status as icons of hip hop derives almost exclusively from their first four albums. After the disintegration of the Bomb Squad, the group would release a series of albums whose critical reception went from lukewarm to downright awful, but not always justifiably so. The 1992 album Greatest Misses got the new production team to rework and remix old classics, with mixed results, as well as to lay down a few tracks in the new, more laid-back mold, but was almost universally snubbed by critics and the public.

The group mounted a comeback on the 1994 Muse Sick-N-Hour Mess Age, a savage attack on the nascent gangsta era that, despite some excellent tracks, was uniformly dismissed by music critics, notoriously receiving two stars in Rolling Stone. Many have sought to explain the album’s reception more through the context that received it than its inherent qualities: The gangsta era was in full swing, having yet to be turned toward more positive ends and fused with political projects. Two years later, we would see Chuck D’s solo effort, Autobiography of Mistachuck, an album that moved as far as one might think possible away from the classic Bomb Squad sound. More soulful and funk-oriented—musician Eric Sadler returned to the production team, this time without the overbearing gaze of Hank Shocklee, and Isaac Hayes was invited to do a guest spot—the album was conceived as a direct answer to those critics who dismissed his relevance in the new era of rap. Most ignored the album, and even sympathetic reviews observed a certain repetitiveness in Chuck’s subject matter.

In the late nineties, Spike Lee once again enlisted Public Enemy to back up a film, this time the basketball drama whose name the album would share: He Got Game. Released in 1998, the album would be greeted by a significantly
more hospitable atmosphere than had been the case just a few years earlier. The album also constituted something of a reunion, seeing the return of Griff (after solo work), Terminator X (after a serious motorcycle accident), Flav (after a number of run-ins with the law), and the original Bomb Squad lineup, although given the laid-back melodies and clean beats, one ultimately wonders who was playing the perennially crucial role of production mastermind. Critical reviews showed a marked recovery (Rolling Stone’s assessment recovered to a still-modest three and a half stars), and the group scored a minor hit with the Buffalo Springfield-inspired title cut.

He Got Game would be the group’s last album on Def Jam. After posting the industrial remix album Bring the Noise 2000 on the group’s Web site for free downloading in support of MP3 technology, Chuck D was forced by distributor Polygram to remove it. On December 9, 1998, he posted the following on his “Terrordome” column on the Public Enemy Web site: “The execs, lawyers and accountants who lately have made most of the money in the music biz, are now running scared from the technology that evens out the creative field and makes artists harder to pimp.” His final word was less than conciliatory, expressing a deep-seated grudge against the entire industry: “Let ’em all die. . . . I’m glad to be a contributor to the bomb.” The group also posted an MP3 version of “Swindler’s Lust,” an antexploitation and antiindustry rant whose title some have interpreted as anti-Semitic. Not surprisingly, Public Enemy would be released from their Def Jam contract shortly thereafter.

From then on, Chuck would be a spokesperson for file-sharing technology, and their next album, There’s a Poison Goin On, would be released entirely as MP3s. Public Enemy was out of the industry, but whether this was a blessing or a curse is hard to say. After a couple of remix and compilation albums, Public Enemy put out two more full albums. In 2005 we saw the release of New Whirl Odor, with DJ Lord replacing Terminator X, and while the sound was strong, few were able to look past Flavor Flav’s appearances on a series of reality shows, from The Surreal Life to Strange Love and finally Flavor of Love. Unfortunately, Chuck D’s own forays into the public arena as a television and radio host on Air America have been all but entirely eclipsed by his partner’s exploits (see sidebar: Grills).

In 2005, Chuck D ran into a self-described disciple of his, revolutionary Bay Area rapper Paris (most famous for his 1992 “Bush Killa”), who offered to collaborate on the next P.E. album. To Paris’s surprise, Chuck asked him to write and produce the entire album, and to release it on his own Guerrilla Funk Records. The album, released under the title Rebirth of a Nation in early 2006, is an attempt to escape the rut that Public Enemy had fallen into, and it does so by simultaneously looking forward and backward. Explicitly framed as a throwback album, Rebirth contains a multitude of references and samples that draw the listener back to the classic Public Enemy of Nation of Millions. But the album also propels the group forward into the post-gangsta
era—no doubt largely due to Paris’s influence—through collaborations with former NWA member MC Ren as well as post-gangsta revolutionaries dead prez, Kam, and Immortal Technique. After a few aborted Public Enemy comeback attempts, Paris’s influence may help kickstart a proper “rebirth.”

REVOLUTIONARY, NOT GANGSTA

The decline of Public Enemy, while sparked largely by the implosion of the Bomb Squad, reflects a broader shift that had been taking place in rap ever since the rise of gangsta rap in the early 1990s. Public Enemy essentially created political hip hop and pioneered a revolutionary vision, and as that vision was increasingly interrogated by later artists, Chuck D would turn his attention to attacking those he saw as responsible for undermining Public Enemy’s political project and harming the black community in the process.

Grills
George Ciccariello-Maher

Flavor Flav popularized wearing gold, silver, platinum, or diamond-studded teeth, now called grills, as part of his hip hop attire. Flav once remarked that he would never wear platinum teeth, but this didn’t prevent his sporting of gold teeth from catching on. Since the late 1990s, grills have exploded in popularity, largely driven by their prominence among Dirty South, Crunk, and Houston’s Chopped and Screwed rappers, and are known variously as fronts, plates, golds, and pullouts. As a result of their popularity and expense, grills have become one of rap’s premiere status symbols.

Specifically, grill artists-turned-rappers such as Houston’s Paul Wall have consistently made grills a central reference point in their lyrics. Appearing on Kanye West’s 2006 single “Drive Slow,” Wall raps: “I open up my mouth and sunlight illuminates the dark.” Moreover, in 2005 Wall collaborated with Nelly, Jermaine Dupri, Ali, and Gipp (who claims he originated the style) on “Let Me See Your Grill,” a track dedicated entirely to flashy mouthwear. In music videos, these artists flashed their grills for the camera. Paul Wall’s Web site devoted to his Houston-based grill-fitting business features a number of grills that can be ordered, ranging in price from $65 to $1,800 per row.

The mainstream popularity of grills is evident from the fact that artists as diverse as Kelis, Hulk Hogan’s daughter Brooke, Korn, and Marilyn Manson have appeared in public with the flashy mouthwear. Recently, there has been a certain degree of backlash against the popularity of grills, as they were singled out to be banned by some Texas school districts in 2006, giving rise to claims that such a specific targeting of grills was a racist gesture.
We will conclude by discussing the broader legacy of Public Enemy’s politi-
cized rap and some critiques leveled against it.

In the early 1990s, Public Enemy’s nascent genre of political hip hop came
to be steadily undermined by a new wave of rap: “By 1991 the rules and
rulers of hip-hop were changing, with biting black nationalist commentary
and an Afrocentric worldview giving way to sexual hedonism and the glamor-
ization of violence. Public Enemy failed to react” (Dyson 167). But they did
react, especially on the 1994 *Muse Sick*, where Chuck D devotes significant
lyrical venom to attacking the rise of gangsta, especially on tracks like “Give
It Up” and “So Whatcha Gone Do Now?” Dyson rightly worries that such
interventions reflect a Public Enemy that refused to change and come to terms
with its own abandonment by hip hop fans (see sidebar: Stop the Violence).

More worrying still are the strange bedfellows that accompany a critique of
the gangsta genre, including “reactionary elements of the black bourgeoise
and white conservatives” (Dyson 170). While Chuck D explicitly denies any
common cause with the white conservatives who demonized rap music during
the 1990s, the charge of sympathy with conservative blacks may be harder to
shake. This is because Chuck D goes on the offensive against those who
would criticize Reverend Calvin Butts or C. Delores Tucker, who he argues
were only targeting the companies distributing rap, not the artists themselves.
But in their quest, Butts and Tucker teamed up with precisely those white
archconservatives—like William Bennett and Bob Dole—that Chuck D would

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**Stop the Violence**

*Mickey Hess*

Gangsta rap was born out of the street gang culture of the 1980s. Artists like
Schoolly D, the Geto Boys, N.W.A., and Ice-T brought gang imagery into their
music through stories of gunplay, drug dealing, and avoiding the police. The
1989 Stop the Violence movement and the 1990 single “We’re All in the
Same Gang” were efforts to use hip hop music to promote an antigang
message. The Stop the Violence All Stars consisted of rap artists KRS-One,
Just-Ice, Doug E. Fresh, Kool Moe Dee, MC Lyte, Public Enemy, Heavy D, and
Stetsasonic, who collaborated to produce a track, “Self Destruction,” that
urged young black men to stop turning their guns on each other. Similarly,
King Tee, J.J. Fad, Michel’le, Body and Soul, Above the Law, N.W.A., Tone Loc,
Digital Underground, Young MC, Oaktown’s 3-5-7, and MC Hammer colla-
borated to form the West Coast Rap All-Stars and to record the song, “We’re
All in the Same Gang,” which promoted a message of unity in the face of
recent gang standoffs, particularly between LA factions of the Bloods and
Crips. These songs raised awareness of gang issues but of course did not end
gang violence. N.W.A., in fact, continued to tell stories of gang violence in
their songs, even after recording this antigang message.
attack, and their method was nothing less than a Senate subcommittee, a reactionary arm of the U.S. government. In the end, Chuck even went so far as to blame the victim by claiming that it is gangsta rappers themselves who are responsible for the censoring and limiting of rap.

What Public Enemy, and Chuck D more specifically, seemed to neglect was the crucial reality reflected in the rise of gangsta, a reality that exceeded the financial incentives recognized by Chuck. Rather, one could interpret the rise of gangsta rap as in part a critique of the shortcomings of the early political rap epitomized by Public Enemy. “L.A. gangsta rappers are frequent critics of black nationalists,” Robin D. G. Kelley argues, and the same could be said of “ghettocentric” culture more generally, a culture wary of all abstract political statements that run the risk of “obscur[ing] the daily battles poor black folk have to wage in contemporary America” (212). Gangsta rap seeks to make up for this deficiency by providing a series of perspectival first-person narratives that illustrate the reality of life as a young black male in a country where they can only be viewed—as Public Enemy’s name reflects—as a threat.

Perhaps more damningly, Errol Henderson questions even Public Enemy’s revolutionary credentials. He highlights the potential, especially in early P.E., to foster little more than a “myth of action” or “politics as theater” that “promotes proclamation over demonstration,” and which was revealed when Chuck caved to public and industry pressure during the course of the Griff controversy (328-329). Moreover, Henderson argues that it was more organizationally rooted cultural nationalists like X-Clan that pushed Public Enemy to move beyond the lukewarm politics of Fear of a Black Planet and on to a more radical nationalism on Apocalypse.

**P.E.’S IMPACT AND LEGACY IN THE POST-GANGSTA ERA**

Michael Eric Dyson argues that “Public Enemy is, hands down, the most influential and important group in the history of hip-hop” (165). However, given the fact that Public Enemy pioneered early political rap and given the group’s close ties to the genre, we might not be so content with a sanguine account of the group’s massive influence. This is because the decline of Public Enemy, their earlier influence notwithstanding, tells us a great deal about the potential and limitations of political rap more generally, or at least those forms of political rap that fit the aesthetic and didactic molds crafted by this seminal group.

In terms of influence on a younger generation of rappers—political or otherwise—it would be difficult to overstate the importance of Public Enemy, and this legacy spans the political, aesthetic, and technological realms. By pioneering and essentially inventing a style of straightforwardly political hip hop, P.E. were a direct influence and a necessary precondition for much of what followed: Few political rappers who followed could deny that their work had been influenced by Public Enemy. Beyond the purely political,
moreover, Public Enemy’s explicit disciples span from the early gangsta rap of N.W.A. to the more mainstream Busta Rhymes, the underground stylings of El-P and the Def Jux label, and even slam poet Saul Williams.

Aesthetically, the list is at least as long, if not longer. The erratic layering and sampling of the Bomb Squad would be deemed postmodern by critics and would inspire a generation of rappers. Moreover, Public Enemy’s very sonic compositions would make their sound more available and accessible to artists outside the genre, and this would appear explicitly in the 1991 collaboration with thrash metal band Anthrax on a remix of “Bring the Noise” (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Metal). This collaboration would almost single-handedly spawn the “rap metal” genre, with which Chuck D would later reconnect on a 1996

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**Hip Hop and Metal**

Robin Chamberlain

The relationship between metal and hip hop has always been tenuous, as evidenced by the multiplicity of names that have been used to describe music that includes elements of both genres. These labels include rapcore, rap-rock, rap-metal, and nu metal (a term that includes, but is not limited to, metal with hip hop elements). Rather than being defined by a distinctive sound, the many intersections of hip hop and metal are best characterized by their openness to fusion and a willingness to address contentious political issues. In both sound and content, rap-metal tends to be aggressive and confrontational. This is only one of the reasons that rap-metal is a genre viewed with suspicion by many fans and artists of both metal and hip hop. Another key reason for the uneasy relationship between rap-metal and hip hop is that rap-metal has been, and continues to be, largely the domain of white musicians. Despite these tensions, rapcore’s continued success since its genesis in the mid-1980s anchors it within the history and development of hip hop.

The forefathers of rapcore include such popular groups as Beastie Boys, Run-DMC, and Public Enemy, all of whom used elements of rock and metal in their music. The Beastie Boys featured Slayer guitarist Kerry King on “No Sleep ‘til Brooklyn” and Public Enemy collaborated with the thrash group Anthrax to record a metal version of their hit “Bring the Noise.” The first group that can clearly be defined as rapcore, though, is Urban Dance Squad, a little-known Dutch group whose contributions to musical history include inspiring the hugely popular band Rage Against the Machine. The metal band Body Count, fronted by rapper Ice-T, managed to bring together fans of both rap and rock, and are remembered for the controversy they created with their song “Cop Killer.” Despite, or perhaps because of, the conflicted relationship between metal and hip hop, not to mention between hip hop and rapcore or metal and rapcore, these genres continue to be mutually influential, both intentionally and through attempts to both define and transcend generic categories.
collaboration with Rage Against the Machine—yet another group claiming to have been influenced by P.E.—which covered “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos.”

Technologically, Public Enemy was always at the forefront of developments, even to the detriment of their careers. From sampling technology to a fidelity to MP3 technology that ended their distribution deal, their radicalism was as much technological as it was political. Currently, Public Enemy composes their work electronically and transmits it back and forth by e-mail, and Hank Shocklee is engaged in projects that aim to push the limits of electronic music.

However, to fully grasp the importance of Public Enemy, we must situate their influence within the broader history of hip hop. While all attempts to periodize are necessarily problematic, it is useful to consider the development of political rap in terms of three historical stages, as suggested earlier. The first wave is represented by rappers like Public Enemy and KRS-One, who from the late 1980s explicitly endorsed radical political transformation through programmatic statements in the form of music, thereby contributing massively to the political development of the post–civil rights generation.

However, this early political rap would come under severe critique as early as 1990, with the expanding popularity of gangsta rap, a first-person narrative of the effects of Reaganomics, the crack cocaine epidemic, and the resulting militarization of black communities. Gangsta was critical of the preachy nature of early political rap as well as its tendency to emphasize foreign politics at the expense of conditions in domestic ghettos. Such neglect would often emerge from the black middle classes and often contained idealist arguments such as the so-called culture of poverty, which ignore structural economic conditions and racism, focusing instead on criticizing and criminalizing the behavior of lower-class blacks.

Post-gangsta political hip hop (see sidebar: Post-Gangsta Political Hip Hop) is a dialectical synthesis of the radical political impetus of early rap and the more materialistic and ghettocentric focus of gangsta, allowing for a more

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**Post-Gangsta Political Hip Hop**

*George Ciccariello-Maher*

While one can find traces of the synthesis in earlier artists (and even on Boogie Down Productions’ *Criminal Minded*, prior to KRS-One’s turn to more explicitly political rap), the third stage in the political development of hip hop emerged fully with the increasing popularity of rappers like Black Star’s Mos Def and Talib Kweli, Nas, the Roots, Paris, and Common in the late 1990s. However, the highest development of post-gangsta political rap can be found in groups like the Coup and dead prez and is most explicitly enunciated by the latter.

Dead prez expresses the character of post-gangsta political rap best when, on the track “I’m a African” from their first album, *Let’s Get Free* (2000), they
claim that their music creates a space between the street-gang-themed gangsta rap of N.W.A. and the black militant politics of Public Enemy. This song continues with an explicit endorsement of the gangsta critique of preachy rap, in which they transform Stetsasonic’s classic Afrocentric anthem “Free South Africa,” which in its original version falls into a culture of poverty argument by claiming that Africans and African-Americans both need help: “them with their government, us with mentality.” To correct this error, dead prez replaces the original list of African nations with diasporic communities: “Puerto Rico, Haiti, and J.A., New York and Cali, F.L.A.”

This post-gangsta mentality is deepened throughout the course of the two mixtapes released in 2002 and 2003 under the moniker “dpz,” which prepared the ground for the album whose title can be interpreted as best summing up the post-gangsta synthesis: Revolutionary but Gangsta (2004). On these mixtapes, revolutionary black nationalism is fused with gangsta culture: The acronym RBG is derived from the colors of the Garveyite flag and O.G. (original gangsta) becomes “original Garvey.” Moreover, gangstas are equated with freedom fighters, complementing a redefinition of gangs themselves: “dedicated, ready to bleed for what they believe.” This post-gangsta fusion appears most clearly on a collaboration with the Coup titled “Get Up,” in which warring street gangs such as the Crips and Bloods are urged to unite against the true enemy, the government: “it’s one team: get up and let’s ride.” This is the political program of the post-gangsta era.

sophisticated approach to black politics that avoids the twin dangers of the preachy “culture of poverty” argument and the inward-oriented nihilism of an uncritically gangsta approach. It is from this recognition that we can understand the historical importance of Public Enemy, as well as those who have charted a political course beyond the parameters of the early political rap that Public Enemy invented. Even for their radical critics in the black community, Public Enemy still represents the fundamental starting point and reference point for any attempt to construct a revolutionary hip hop. That is to say, even in the negative gesture of critique Public Enemy exerts a positive influence on the further development of rap.

There is a certain degree to which the critiques of Public Enemy voiced earlier come together: The nationalist critique of a merely “mythical” action and the gangsta critique of the mythologization of some nationalisms are but the flip side of the same coin. Rappers of the post-gangsta era are forced to tread the political line that runs between the two by recognizing the crucial observations provided by gangsta rap while tethering these observations to a resolutely political project. If we have reason for optimism about the future of Public Enemy—the continuing impact of their icon status—it lies with their recent collaborations with some central members of the post-gangsta generation of political rappers. Public Enemy forges into the post-gangsta era
on *Rebirth of a Nation*, maintaining their politics but also building the necessary ties to a younger generation of artists to whom the recasting of the post-gangsta political genre will fall.

*See also:* Beastie Boys, Run-DMC, Ice Cube

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**FURTHER RESOURCES**


In a business in which music careers are made and broken overnight, the fourteen-year career of the group Salt-N-Pepa is worth analyzing and celebrating. From their humble beginnings as telephone representatives for Sears, through surviving two different DJs, several record companies, a difficult separation from their longtime manager, and five albums, the trio of Cheryl “Salt” Renee James, Sandra “Pepa” Denton, and Deidre “DJ Spinderella” Roper have proven that they are indeed strong and independent women.
And their careers as members of Salt-N-Pepa are ones that many female artists and fans can relate to, as the group faced many challenges being one of the first all-female rap crews (see sidebar: Women and DJ Culture).

The success and longevity of Salt-N-Pepa proved that rap music was not solely for men, since these women, along with many other women before and after them, were responsible for carving out a space for female MCs and DJs in the rap business. In fact, they achieved their success by making rap music

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**Women and DJ Culture**

*Athena Elafros*

Djing is an artistic form that played a central role in the formation of the hip hop movement, a youth movement in the South Bronx that began around the mid-1970s and consisted of four key elements: break dancers, MCs (who would eventually become what we know as rappers), DJs, and graffiti artists. Rappers and rap music are the most successful of the art forms to emerge from hip hop culture. Although there are very few female DJs with record contracts in rap music, there is a very strong tradition of female Djing in the hip hop movement. Long before Deidre “Spinderella” Roper was bringing us such classics as “Spinderella’s Not a Fella (But a Girl Dj),” there were pioneers in the movement by the names of DJ Jazzy Joyce and DJ Wanda Dee.

Originally from the Bronx, DJ Jazzy Joyce began deejaying in 1981 when she was only eleven years old. By 1986 she was the DJ on Sweet Tee’s seminal rap, “It’s My Beat.” Currently, Joyce and DJ Cocoa Chanelle broadcast a radio show called *Ladies Night* on New York City’s HOT 97 FM.

DJ Wanda Dee began to DJ as a member of Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation. She was the first female DJ to be featured in the 1984 Harry Belafonte movie *Beat Street*, which resulted in a European tour and a record deal. Eventually Wanda Dee became a recording and songwriting artist, and she has cowritten numerous multiplatinum hits. She was also one of the first solo female rap artists to release two consecutive platinum singles—“The Goddess” and “To the Bone” in 1989. Her career continued to flourish as she became, and still is, the lead vocalist of the multiplatinum British techno group called the KLF.

Despite this long tradition, female DJs are still outnumbered by male DJs. This may be because female DJs are paid much less than male DJs, they are more severely critiqued in their musical choices, and they do not become producers as easily as some of their male counterparts. Yet the numbers of female DJs seem to be increasing, since the aforementioned trailblazers have been followed by a slew of successful female DJs such as DJ Belinda Becker (of Buddha Bar fame), Brooklyn veteran Cocoa Chanelle, Japanese-born DJ Kaori Ueta (whose manager is Funkmaster Flex), and Manhattan-based DJ Beverly Bond, among others. As the number of female DJs continues to rise, these DJs can continue to challenge and change the male-dominated arena of Djing and production from the inside.
from a woman’s point of view—a point of view with appeal to a population that had been craving such an outlet. By focusing on messages of female self-empowerment and positive female sexuality, and placing women’s issues in the forefront, the group garnered a strong female following. Even when Salt-N-Pepa were not in full creative control of their musical careers, due to the strict command of their manager, Ernst “Hurby Luv Bug” Azor, they could still be heralded as an example of women who succeeded in the rap industry.

Furthermore, with their catchy R&B-inspired rap songs, many of their albums reached gold and platinum status, thereby expanding the audience of rap music and crossing over into the pop music charts. Thus, the members of Salt-N-Pepa were female pioneers in the rap business, and they should be remembered as one of the first thriving all-female rap acts to succeed in the business. Through their immense popularity they were able to challenge racist assumptions about rap music in general, and as one of the first accomplished all-female rap groups, they were also able to challenge sexist assumptions about female rappers in particular. Most important, building upon the inroads made by Roxanne Shanté and others, they carved a space for female MCs in rap music, and they promoted woman-centered messages in their music, such as their emphases on the themes of female sexuality and independence.

FEMALE RAPPERS IN THE 1980S

By the time Salt-N-Pepa entered the rap game in 1985, it had been six years since Sugarhill Gang released the worldwide hit “Rapper’s Delight.” Yet, despite the success of rap music on independent labels such as Sugar Hill Records, Tommy Boy Records, Def Jam, and the like, major labels were still hesitant to offer record deals to rap artists. This was because of the commonly held belief at the time that rap music was a passing fad. Similar to the fleeting success of hypercolor shirts, snap bracelets, and other novelties of the eighties, rap music had been unfairly pegged as a musical form that lacked any staying power. The situation was even more difficult for a female MC, let alone an all-female rap crew like Salt-N-Pepa.

The female rap artists of the time were extremely aware of how hard it was to enter the music industry. They had to challenge not only the biases against racially oppressed groups and working-class art but also the male biases and double standards that were applied exclusively to female artists (Guevara 80). One of the most prominent female MCs of the time, Roxanne Shanté, noted in an interview in 1985 with Nancy Guevara that “men say that women are only good for cooking, cleaning and making babies. That’s changing.” And she was adamant that her music was about moving women “out of the kitchen and into the streets” (Guevara 57). In other words, Roxanne Shanté views rap music as a vehicle through which women are moving out of the private sphere and into the public realm.
Salt-N-Pepa was one of the first all-female rap acts to use rap music as a way to gain presence in the public sphere. They were one of the first rap acts that provided black women with a voice in the rap industry. This is one of the key reasons why Salt-N-Pepa hold a prominent place in rap music, since they were one of the first successful all-female rap groups, and they were one of the first groups to cross over into the mainstream music industry. Thus, the success of Salt-N-Pepa not only confirmed that rap music was an art form and indeed a legitimate variety of music, thereby challenging racist assumptions about rap artists, they also proved that female rappers were just as successful, if not more successful than male rappers, thereby challenging sexist assumptions about female rap artists.

In accomplishing these tasks, Salt-N-Pepa was one of the first female rap groups to bring women’s issues to the forefront in rap music. They challenged the male hegemony of rap music by participating and succeeding in what was increasingly being perceived as a masculine music genre. As is often the case, perception and reality may conflict. For although rap music was increasingly being viewed as being synonymous with black masculinity, numerous women were involved in the early years of rap music. For example, between 1978 and 1986, over sixty records were released that featured female MCs and DJs, as well as the first female human beatbox on wax by the name of K Love (Veran, “Women on Wax,” 16-18). Thus, the success of Salt-N-Pepa was a result of numerous female rappers who came before them, whose stories play an important role in the formative herstory of hip hop. Groups such as the Mercedes Ladies, the first all-female MC and DJ crew who formed in 1977, and West Philadelphia’s Lady B, who signed a record deal with T.E.C. Records and released “To the Beat Y’all” in 1980, and South Carolina’s Sequence, a female singing and rapping trio that consisted of Blondie, Cheryl the Pearl, and Angie B. (now known as Angie Stone), who laid some of the groundwork necessary for more women to enter the rap music industry. As already noted, the influence of Roxanne Shanté cannot be underestimated, since Salt-N-Pepa’s entry into the music business was a result of an answer rap directed at Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick’s “The Show.” The answer record, pioneered by Roxanne Shanté in 1984, is still a popular means by which women rappers are able to gain entry into the realm of rap music. Los Angeles native Yolanda Whitaker, also known as Yo-Yo, a protégé of Ice Cube, entered the rap scene as part of a choreographed answer rap, like Roxanne Shanté and Salt-N-Pepa had before her, on a track from Ice Cube’s 1990 release, AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted. The song was titled “It’s a Man’s World” and her response to this song was responsible for launching her music career. N.W.A. was often criticized for its depictions of women in lyrics, but Ice Cube was not the only former N.W.A. member to bring female rappers into the scene. In fact, it was Eazy-E and his Ruthless Records label that introduced J.J. Fad, a female rap trio consisting of three girls from Compton by the names of MCJ.B., Baby-D, and Sassy C. With Dr. Dre producing the
album, this group was the first female rap ensemble to sell a million records through their 1988 platinum album, *Supersonic*.

It is important to discuss these female rap pioneers, since so many of their accomplishments are often omitted from the history of hip hop. Despite the evidence of women playing an active role in the formative years of the movement, much of the writing on rap music has a tendency to focus solely on the roles of male rappers. Therefore, focusing on the importance of Salt-N-Pepa as one of the first all-female rap crews and one of the first rap acts to cross over into the mainstream, we are able to understand how they paved the way for other female rap artists, and rap music in general, to gain greater acceptance on the pop charts. Since their music was fun and danceable yet also conscious of women’s issues, the trio connected with both male and female audiences alike by providing just the right mix of sex appeal with a critical edge, and they specifically connected with their female audience by focusing on issues that mattered to women by providing a female point of view through their lyrics. From self-empowerment to sexuality and feminist critique on the one hand and having fun, dancing, and partying on the other, the music of Salt-N-Pepa had something to offer to everyone.


The members of Salt-N-Pepa include Cheryl “Salt” Renee James, Sandra “Pepa” Denton, and Deidre “DJ Spinderella” Roper (who replaced Salt-N-Pepa’s original DJ, Pamela Latoya Greene, sometimes called “The Original Spinderella”). Salt-N-Pepa come from the Queens and Brooklyn boroughs of New York City. Cheryl grew up in Queens with her parents, elder brother, and younger sister. Her childhood was the most difficult of the group, with her father drinking and her brother eventually being sentenced to a juvenile facility. Sandi also grew up in Queens in a middle-class nuclear family consisting of seven sisters and one brother. Born in Jamaica, her fairly affluent West Indian family moved to Queens while she was a child. Her family was well-educated—one of her sisters is now a lawyer, another sibling is a geologist, and a few of the others own businesses. Deidre, the last member to join the group, grew up in Brooklyn as part of a family of five sisters and brothers. All the members of her family were musical, and by the age of eight she was a dancer in the East New York Theatrical Workshop. A key influence in her musical career was her father, who, during the disco era, had painted their living room black and red and had equipped it with a turntable and lighted ball.

Cheryl and Sandi met at Queensborough Community College while taking classes in nursing. The two were the unlikeliest of friends, with Cheryl being very reserved and introverted and Sandi being very loud and extroverted. It was Cheryl who assisted Sandi in finding a part-time job at Sears’ College
Point, New York, branch. The two friends were employed as Sears telephone service representatives, selling maintenance agreements for Kenmore appliances. It was there that Cheryl and Sandi met Ernst “Hurby Luv Bug” Azor (who would eventually become their manager and Cheryl’s boyfriend). Ernst was also working as a part-time sales rep at Sears, and he convinced Cheryl and Sandi to help him with a school recording project he was working on, as he was a student in the Center for Media Arts in Manhattan. The end result was the 1985 recording of “The Show Stopper,” which was an answer rap, also known as a response, to the Doug E. Fresh and Slick Rick song “The Show.” It was perhaps the immense popularity of “The Show” that made it an excellent target for an answer rap and a great way to launch a career in the rap music business. Capitalizing on the immense success of another Queens native, Roxanne Shanté, and her 1984 answer rap “Roxanne’s Revenge,” Ernst saw “The Show Stopper” as an excellent opportunity for Salt-N-Pepa to successfully enter the rap scene. So, once the track was completed, he contacted his friend Marlon “Marley Marl” Williams.

Marley Marl had been the producer and engineer of Roxanne Shanté’s first musical release, and Ernst convinced him to play Salt-N-Pepa’s “The Show Stopper” for some people he knew at Pop Art Records. From there, the track was released as a record single and reached number 46 on the Billboard R&B singles chart. 1985 proved fruitful for numerous female MCs like Sparky D (one of the MCs who replied to Roxanne Shanté’s answer rap against the rap group U.T.F.O.), who procured the first commercial endorsement for a rapper when she appeared in a Mountain Dew radio ad; K Love, who was the first female human beatbox to be recorded on wax; and Shaunie Dee, who became the first female rapper to take part in the 1985 New Music Seminar’s MC Battle for World Supremacy against the infamous Kool Keith (“Hip-Hop Herstory” 170-171).

That same year, based on the success of “The Show Stopper,” Cheryl, Sandi, and Ernst earned a contract with the independent label Next Plateau Records. During their early years, the group had not gone by the name of Salt-N-Pepa; rather, they called themselves Super Nature. It was only once they signed with Next Plateau Records that their name changed, as did the dynamics of the group. Next Plateau released Salt-N-Pepa’s first album, *Hot, Cool & Vicious*, in 1986, and the album earned them a Grammy nomination.

**HOT, COOL & VICIOUS**

*Hot, Cool & Vicious* (1986) featured Salt-N-Pepa’s successful single, “The Show Stopper,” among other classic tracks. One of the seminal songs from this album is “Tramp,” where Salt-N-Pepa flip the script, or turn the tables on their male counterparts by using the word *tramp* to describe aggressive men who hit on women in nightclubs. They resignify or change the meaning of
tramp, which generally refers solely to loose or sexually promiscuous women, by using it against men. Thus they reclaim a derogatory word that is normally used against women by expanding its definition to include men. In essence, they offer a critique of the double standard for men and women in terms of sexuality. The group poses this question to their audience: Why are men allowed to sleep with whomever they choose, yet women are labeled as tramps for the same behavior? In order to remedy the situation for women, they stigmatize male promiscuity by defining promiscuous men as tramps, therefore undermining the degrading woman-as-tramp image (Rose 118). Many female rappers have since adopted this type of redefinition. For example, in Yo Yo’s 1992 release, Black Pearl, she has a song called “Hoes” that resignifies the term ho so that it applies to men as well as women. Just as Salt-N-Pepa did with “Tramp,” Yo Yo takes a term that is most often used against women and challenges the double standard of sexuality by expanding it to include men.

Salt-N-Pepa achieved some success with “Tramp” and other songs, but it was not until the release of a remix of “Push It” in 1988 that the group gained much notoriety. Originally recorded as a joke and the B side of “Tramp,” this track launched their careers and was one of the first rap songs ever to receive a Grammy nomination. “Push It” differs greatly from “Tramp” in that it is possible to interpret the message of this song in more than one way. The first reading may suggest that unlike the pro-woman message of “Tramp,” the lyrics of “Push It,” which are few and far between, are not particularly emancipating. With the group asking men to pump “it” hard like the music that is playing, this song is a far cry from calling men tramps. It may be interpreted as merely reinforcing the all-too-familiar stereotype of women as sexual objects who exist only to pleasure men. But the song may also be seen as portraying women as the subjects of their own sexuality. They are not waiting for a man to make the first move—they are telling him to do so. However, to this day the trio contends that “Push It” is not about sex but about dancing and pushing it on the dance floor. Regardless of the exact meaning of the song, what is central in each interpretation is that it focuses specifically on the black female body with an emphasis on physicality and enjoyment.

Comparing and contrasting “The Show Stopper” and “Push It” exposes two of the recurrent issues in Salt-N-Pepa’s music. Salt-N-Pepa’s reaction to these issues offers a feminine correction to the masculine biases of rap music, provides an empowering message to all women about their bodies, and is one of the primary reasons why Salt-N-Pepa are rap icons (see sidebar: “Feminism in Rap Music”). The first recurring theme deals with male-centered ways of thinking, which are picked apart and criticized by Salt-N-Pepa when they challenge the double standards between men and women—not only in the rap music business but in society in general. The second recurring theme is black female sexuality, which at the time was not commonly considered as the
Feminism in Rap Music
Athena Elafros

The label feminist has proven to be a difficult type of self-identification for many black female rappers. As Tricia Rose notes, it is sometimes seen to apply to members of a white middle-class women’s social movement, and as such, it is an identifier which many black women have a difficult time connecting with, and many black female rappers try to distance themselves from.

Intersections of race, gender, and class make it difficult for black female rappers to engage in cross-racial sisterhood, especially if that sisterhood exists at the expense of black women’s racial identity (Rose 127). This is not to say that black female rappers do not critique and challenge the misogyny and sexist discourses of their male counterparts. As the work of Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, Yo Yo, MC Lyte, and others illustrates, a central aim of black female rappers is to challenge sexism within rap music and to provide a space for the voices of women rappers.

Some of the seminal songs from these early female rappers include Queen Latifah’s “Ladies First,” which offered an Afrocentric and pro-woman message critiquing sexism in the rap music industry; MC Lyte’s “Paper Thin,” which is a “scathing rap about male dishonesty/infidelity” (Rose 119); and Yo Yo’s “The IBWC” (Intelligent Black Women’s Coalition), in which she succinctly tells men that if they are not “with her” on the same footing and do not treat her with the respect that she deserves, then they are “behind her,” since they are not her equal. What is central about all these songs is that sexism is being challenged in both the public realm (rap music industry) and the private sphere (relationships).

More recently, one of the most important and decisive attacks on misogyny in rap music has come from a female lyricist named Sarah Jones. Signifying on the seminal Black Arts Movement song, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” by Gil Scott Heron, Jones’s rendition of this track has the chorus “Your revolution will not happen between these thighs.” In this song, titled “Your Revolution,” she acts as lyricist and DJ Vadim is the DJ, and she critiques Shaggy, LL Cool J, Foxy Brown, and many others whom she feels contribute to the proliferation of degrading images of black womanhood which hurt the self-image of many black women. It should be noted that by extending her critique of misogyny to a female artist (Foxy Brown), she is drawing attention to the fact that not all black female rappers challenge the sexist portrayals of black women, since some of them are deeply implicated in the production of such negative images. She is also critiquing the hypercommodified materialism of certain strains of rap music, while at the same time providing an alternative to this commodification.

Now, whether Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Yo Yo, or Sarah Jones adopt or reject the label of feminist seems somewhat unimportant. What is very
image of North American beauty among many Americans. In many of their songs, Salt-N-Pepa depict the black female body as beautiful—a message that reinforces a positive body image for all women that also challenges stereotypical and racist beauty ideals.

These two songs also touch upon the complicated and contested matter of the representation of female sexuality in rap music and the controversial terrain between self-empowerment and exploitation. One of the questions often raised about this issue is whether images of female sexuality empower women or exploit them. As we have already seen from the various interpretations of “Push It,” this matter is much more complicated than a simple dichotomy of exploitation versus empowerment.

RISE TO STARDOM (1987–1991)

In May 1987, Ernst held auditions in his garage to find a new DJ because Salt-N-Pepa’s original DJ, Pamela Latoya Greene, was leaving the group to get married. Thus Deidre “DJ Spinderella” Roper became the third member of Salt-N-Pepa, although Cheryl and Sandi had to convince Deidre’s parents to allow her to become part of the group.

With Deidre in the new lineup, Salt-N-Pepa released a new album on Next Plateau Records in 1988 called *A Salt with a Deadly Pepa*. Although it did not do as well as their debut album, it nonetheless certified gold. In the liner notes are excerpts from a *Spin* magazine interview by Jessica Bendinger and Harry “The Hip Hop Activist and Media Assassin” Allen. In the interview Cheryl and Sandi recall the hard times they went through when they first started out, including all the shows they played in the middle of the night in school cafeterias in New York. With the success of their past album under their belts, the trio no longer had to worry about performing in such small venues, since they were now able to fill larger auditoriums. Yet these comments in their liner notes serve as a reminder of how far rap music had come from the start of the group’s career only been three years previously, and the fact that Salt-N-Pepa was paving the way for female artists for years to come.

One of the key tracks from this album is Salt-N-Pepa’s rap duet with the band E.U, “Shake Your Thang.” Salt-N-Pepa offers a verbal display of black women’s sexual resistance (Rose 124). This song serves as a confirmation and
assertion that black female bodies and black female sexuality are beautiful. Salt-N-Pepa sing about the freedom of dancing and enjoying your body, and specifically of showing no shame in this enjoyment since it is your body and you are able to do with it as you please. In the song, they also specifically emphasize their butts—better known as “thangs”—which they can shake in whichever way they feel. This could be seen as a way of challenging the beauty bias that renders the black female body sexually unattractive (Rose 125). Once again, Salt-N-Pepa support a positive body image for black women while simultaneously expressing their own sexuality.

However, it is important to remember that in these early stages of their careers, Ernst was the group’s manager and producer and he also exercised very strict control over both the sound and the image of the group. In terms of sound, Ernst produced most of the songs on the first few albums, although the trio claim that they provided many lyrics for earlier albums, for which they never received production credits. In terms of image, Ernst would dictate what the girls would wear and whom they would associate with, thus controlling most aspects of their lives. This was accomplished through his management company, Idol Makers, through which he oversaw the careers of Salt-N-Pepa and Kid ’N Play, among others.

Kid ’N Play was a hip hop duo consisting of Christopher “Kid” Reid and Christopher “Play” Martin, who had also met Ernst by working at Sears as sales representatives. Originally known as Fresh Force in 1985, they changed their name in 1987 and released the track “Last Night,” which was a cheesy tale of an unfortunate double date. It was also around this time that they teamed up with Ernst, who would eventually release the duo’s debut album, *2 Hype* (1988), which featured wholesome parent-friendly raps. As with Salt-N-Pepa, Ernst exercised a certain degree of creative control over the music and image of Kid ’N Play.

So what degree of control or agency did Salt-N-Pepa have over their creative product? More important, does the question of agency even matter? Does the message of empowerment and sexual resistance in the song “Shake Your Thang” change if Ernst was responsible for the lyrics, concept, and music video? Or is it more important to examine the ways in which audiences respond to the music, thus reducing the original intent of the artist to secondary importance?

To complicate matters further, what had also changed in this brief time span since the inception of the group was that Cheryl and Ernst had become lovers. This placed a great deal of strain on the group since Sandi felt that she was not able to be critical of Ernst. She also felt that Cheryl supported Ernst more than she supported Sandi. Cheryl and Ernst became one of rap music’s first famous couples, and together they helped place rap music on the charts.

However, all was not as glorious as it seemed. Ernst was constantly cheating on Cheryl. For a long time it was not apparent, but eventually Cheryl came to realize what was happening. In an effort to stop the cheating, Cheryl
proposed marriage to Ernst, who responded that he did not want to get married. After this turning point in the relationship, the couple had a series of breakups and reconciliations that led to a permanent split in 1989. The final album in which Ernst played a primary and controlling role was released in 1990, *Blacks’ Magic*. This was also the last album to be released on Next Plateau Records.

The eventual departure of Ernst from the group would be significant, in that it would allow Salt-N-Pepa, or more specifically Cheryl, an opportunity to play an increased role in the creative process and production of their music. Also, the split with Ernst would also allow them to get better recording contracts, since much of the money they had made thus far was being pocketed by Ernst and his recording company.

**BLACKS’ MAGIC**

Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing well into the early 1990s, a different strain of rap music emerged on the hip hop scene. It had gained steam around 1987 with the release of Public Enemy’s *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* (Def Jam), which featured the influential track “Rightstarter (Message to a Black Man).” The cover of the album featured members of the group in black berets and black bomber jackets. They were a visual representation of the Black Panthers, and their song lyrics featured Nation of Islam teachings. Public Enemy’s follow-up album in 1988, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam), was more politicized than their first album and even more influential in its scope.

Some very important female MCs also emerged during this period. One year prior to the release of *Blacks’ Magic* in 1989, Queen Latifah had released her debut album, *All Hail the Queen* (Tommy Boy). In full military regalia and African headdress, Queen Latifah’s image on her album cover was a physical incarnation of the symbol for Mother Africa. Her music was woman-centered and Afrocentric, and along with Public Enemy and other artists during this era, a specific strain of Afrocentric nationalism in hip hop began to rise. Given these developments, it is not surprising that *Blacks’ Magic* had a more Afrocentric message. Although Salt-N-Pepa were not part of this new strain of hip hop, songs such as “Negro Wit’ an Ego” show the influences of this strain of rap on their musical sound. Other than this apparent change in their image and sound, the release of *Blacks’ Magic* marked another turning point in the career of the group, especially in terms of creative control of their music.

By 1990 the group was thriving, with *Blacks’ Magic* attaining platinum and selling more than 1 million copies. The album was so successful that it stayed on the charts for two solid years. Yet, despite these successes, the trio were unhappy with the record deal they had made when they first started out.
Years before, the group had signed a deal with Next Plateau Records that had paid Idol Makers, Ernst’s production company, a reported $5 million for production costs. This money was divided, with half going to Ernst and the other half going to the group to be divided three ways. For the trio, this was a very unfair distribution of the finances, since Salt-N-Pepa insist that they had written tracks on previous albums for which they had never received any monetary rewards. Some of these problems were addressed on Blacks’ Magic. Cheryl received production credits for five of the fourteen tracks on the album, and three of those five tracks were produced solely by her. In addition, Deidre produced a track, and all of the members of the group contributed lyrics. The most successful track from the album was the Top 20 Billboard hit “Let’s Talk About Sex,” which skyrocketed their careers even further.

This song was significant because it was released during a time when the threat of HIV and AIDS were being broadcast on media networks across the country. The early 1990s was also a time of intensive education on the subject of sexually transmitted diseases and this song played a key role in educating young people about the dangers of unprotected sex. The song was so popular that it was eventually rewritten and rerecorded by the group as “Let’s Talk About AIDS.” Acts like T.L.C. followed in the footsteps of the successful trio by making explicit references to safe sex practices on their debut album released in 1992, Ooooooooh . . . On the T.L.C. Tip (LaFace Records). During this period in their careers, T.L.C. wore multicolored unwrapped condoms on their clothing in their music videos and onstage. In 1994 they recorded a song about drug use and AIDS called “Waterfalls” on their album CrazySexyCool (LaFace Records). Thus, Salt-N-Pepa were partially responsible in popularizing safe sex practices in popular music during the early 1990s, and they made talking about sex and sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS socially acceptable.

Another seminal track from the Blacks’ Magic album was “Expressions,” written and produced solely by Cheryl, which also garnered the title of Top Rap Single of the year by Billboard magazine. Due to the immense success of Madonna’s Like a Prayer (1989, Sire/Warner), which had been released one year prior, and a hit single from that album titled “Express Yourself,” songs about female self-expression proved to be very popular and profitable. Whether or not the trio was taking advantage of this trend is debatable. What is certain is that this track uncovers a third theme in the music of Salt-N-Pepa: female independence and equality with men.

“Expressions” espouses female self-expression and its message is that women are just as capable as men of being in command of their lives. The song also makes it very clear that men do not have the right to tell women what to do, since women are able to be independent and in control of any situation. Given the struggle Salt-N-Pepa were going through in terms of the creative control of their music, there is a very important subtext in this song in relation to their own personal struggles over being in charge of their musical careers. For Cheryl, this struggle was even more personal, given that she and Ernst had
recently ended their tumultuous relationship, and she was starting to remove herself from the control and abuse that relationship entailed.


After the release of Blacks’ Magic, the process of separating from Ernst, finding another label, and making another record took roughly three years, but they eventually entered into a new distribution deal with London Records U.S. In the deal, their former label, Next Plateau Records, gave London Records Salt-N-Pepa’s entire catalogue through a licensing agreement. It was also during this time that the trio renegotiated their contract with Ernst. Ernst originally owned 100 percent of the royalties received in Salt-N-Pepa’s name, but his ownership was reduced to 50 percent. However, he was still entitled to one third of all the income that they made, including any royalties from new albums, regardless of whether he played a role in their creation. Unfortunately, conflicts over creative control between male managers and their female clients occur fairly regularly in the rap music industry (see sidebar: Female Rappers with Male Producers).

Despite the conflicts over creative control, Very Necessary (1993) proved to be the most successful of all their releases. The album was divided between Ernst on the one hand and Salt-N-Pepa on the other, with both sides ultimately creating hit tracks. In addition, the ladies of Salt-N-Pepa were responsible for the concept of the video for the hit song “Shoop.” Instead of the usual scantily clad women, Salt-N-Pepa provided some eye candy for their female fans by shooting the video almost entirely with men.

Notwithstanding the immense success of Very Necessary, their final album, Brand New (1997), took several years to release due to the fact that

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**Female Rappers with Male Producers**

*Athena Elafros*

From Roxanne Shanté and Marlon “Marley Marl” Williams to Salt-N-Pepa and Ernst “Hurby Luv Bug” Azor, to Yo Yo and Ice Cube, to Queen Latifah and Mark the 45 King, many female rappers have entered the rap game through ties to male producers who were already part of the scene.

Due to the overwhelming majority of male producers in the business, this gendered dynamic of entry should not be surprising, as it is mirrored in other musical forms as well. Although some women rappers are operating and founding their own record companies, many still believe that is easier for women to make it if they are connected to a male producer. As Lil’ Kim notes in a 1999 article by Elena Oumano, in *Billboard* magazine, "It’s happening less, but the ones who come in on their own have it harder as opposed to me coming in with Biggie [Smalls, aka the Notorious B.I.G.]."
However, although female artists have entered the rap game through ties with male rappers, many of them, such as Salt-N-Pepa, Yo Yo, and Missy Elliot, eventually gained creative control of their musical product. As more women gain creative control, it should become easier for women rappers to enter the scene through ties with female producers, such as Missy Elliot, thereby challenging the notion that women rappers need male producers in order to succeed.

**Work Cited**


Conceptually and musically it was very different from their past albums. Eventually, however, the group secured a deal with three recording companies, Red Ant Entertainment, Island Black Music, and London Records. Due to personal changes among the members of the group, as well as lackluster sales, this was to be the final album released by the trio.

**VERY NECESSARY**

In the three years between the release of *Blacks’ Magic* and their fourth album, Cheryl and Deidre gave birth to children. Sandi had been the first to have a child, her son Tyran, in 1989. He was followed in 1991 by Cheryl’s daughter, Corin, and eventually by Deidre’s daughter, Christenese, in 1992. Some other important changes also occurred during this time, such as certain members of the group, primarily Cheryl, becoming more religious in their outlook. It was these sorts of lifestyle changes that would eventually lead the group to disband in a few years’ time.

However, 1993 was a very successful year for the group, and after a three-year hiatus to spend time with their families—and after the successful separation from their former label and the partial separation from their manager—Salt-N-Pepa came back to the business stronger than ever and released the most successful album of their careers. *Very Necessary* would eventually go five times platinum. Also, due to its immense success and record sales, the group had once again crossed over into the pop charts. Ernst was still the executive producer on most of the songs, although Cheryl, Sandi, and Deidre were involved in every stage of the album from songwriting to production.

Unlike past albums where Ernst held the majority of creative control, this album was divided between Ernst and Salt-N-Pepa. Ernst created the hit song “Whatta Man” featuring En Vogue, which reached number three on the U.S. charts, and the hit song created by Salt-N-Pepa was “Shoop,” which reached
number four on the U.S. charts. The writing credits for the rest of the songs were heavily contested. It was also this album that won Salt-N-Pepa a Grammy for Best Rap Performance in 1995 for “None of Your Business,” one of the tracks produced by Ernst.

However, although this album had more input from the trio than any of the past albums, the themes did not stray much from their previous releases. “Shoop,” which was coproduced by Mark Sparks, Cheryl, and Sandi was definitely written from a woman’s point of view. The trio once again flips the script on their male counterparts, since the video and the lyrics turn men into sex objects. Instead of showcasing scantily clad women in their music video, the trio has a group of scantily clad men. Thus the sexual desires of women are at the forefront, and the song centers on the trio’s weakness—men.

Female sexuality is at center stage. The male gaze is captured and replaced by the female gaze. The song celebrates women’s sexuality and at the same time places the needs of women first. This was a refreshing change in a time period where blunts, bitches, and booze had become the norm in rap music. Indeed, with the ascendancy of gangsta rap and the start of the G-funk era in 1992, after the release of Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* (Death Row/Interscope) and Snoop Doggy Dogg’s 1993 debut album, *Doggystyle* (Death Row), songs by women, about women, from a pro-woman perspective were very important. These albums were more significant than earlier misogynist releases by N.W.A., 2 Live Crew, and the Geto Boys because their songs and videos were reaching a much wider audience, due to the heavy rotation of their music videos on MTV in the United States and Much Music in Canada. Though the themes in the raps of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg were not significantly different from those of their precursors, or in the case of Dr. Dre one of the rap groups he had founded, what had changed was the scope and breadth of their fan base due to technological advances and an increased likelihood of actually receiving airplay.

Also, the ascendancy and immense influence of gangsta rap, which may be traced back to Philadelphia’s Schoolly D, the West Coast influences of South Central LA’s Ice-T and Compton’s N.W.A., influenced not only the themes but the reception of rap music. More specifically, the themes of authenticity in rap music were inextricably linked to one’s connection with the streets, economic hardship, and black masculinity. “Keeping it real,” a sense of staying close to one’s roots and being true to oneself, now became synonymous with “keeping it gangsta.” The immense success of Salt-N-Pepa and their crossover into the popular music charts resulted in some critics viewing their music as inauthentic (see sidebar: Are Female Rappers “Authentic?”).

Although the trio did not change their sound to reflect the growing influence of gangsta rap, their image, as presented on the album cover of *Very Necessary*, was significantly different. While *A Salt with a Deadly Pepa* (1988) showed the group wearing tight-fitting black and red leather outfits and *Blacks’ Magic* (1990) had them drawn as cartoon figures reading a bedtime story in their nightgowns, *Very Necessary* (1993) had them on the cover
Are Female Rappers “Authentic”?
Athena Elafros

Since the formative years of the hip hop movement, female rappers have had a difficult time claiming authenticity in their music. At first, this may have been a result of sexist assumptions about women’s roles being in the home and not on the streets rapping, which may have resulted in fewer women being involved in the seminal years of the hip hop movement.

For example, Roxanne Shanté, a member of the Juice Crew, which consisted of Marley Marl, Big Daddy Kane, Biz Markie, Kool G. Rap, MC Shan, Craig G., T.J. Swan, and Masta Ace, was reminded of her proper place in the rap scene during one of the most famous beefs, or lyrical feuds, in rap history. The beef all began when MC Shan of the Juice Crew released “The Bridge,” wherein he proclaimed that Queensbridge was the real home of hip hop. When it was released on vinyl in 1986, KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions released “The South Bronx” (B-boy, 1986) and “The Bridge Is Over” (B-boy, 1987) (Jenkins 23-27). It was on “The Bridge Is Over” that KRS-One claimed that Roxanne Shanté was only good for one thing—providing sexual pleasure for men. In a single lyric, her career as a hip hop artist and her authenticity as a rapper were reduced to nothing more than a sexual appendage to male rappers.

This does not mean that women were not involved in the movement, but over the years there has been an active erasure and marginalization of the roles of women rappers in its formative years. For example, groups such as the Mercedes Ladies, the first all-female MC and DJ crew who formed in 1977, and West Philadelphia’s Lady B, who signed a record deal with T.E.C. Records and released “To the Beat Y’all” in 1980, and South Carolina’s Sequence, a female singing and rapping trio, laid some of the groundwork necessary for more women to enter the rap music industry, although many of these artists do not receive the credit they deserve.

This combination of sexism and the diminishment of the roles of women rappers have resulted in hip hop authenticity becoming synonymous with black masculinity. Women rappers were further disenfranchised with the emergence of misogynist strains of gangsta rap in the late 1980s, which resulted in authenticity also becoming equated with sexism. These forms of sexism, erasure, and redefinition of authenticity have made it very difficult for women rappers to break into a very male-dominated music genre.

Yet debates over authenticity in rap music have been occurring since the inception of the genre, and women have actively tried to redefine authenticity in more pro-woman ways. Whether it is through challenging misogyny or rewriting the herstory of the genre, women always have and always will provide feminine correctives to male-centered conceptions of what it means to be an authentic rapper.
in jeans and plaid jackets. It would appear that with their increased creative control, the group may have wanted an album cover that portrayed them in their everyday clothing instead of being represented as sex objects. Perhaps they wanted to symbolize powerful womanhood by reclaiming a male uniform, as they had reclaimed sexist male terminology in the past, as a decisive critique of the rap industry. Or perhaps they wanted to show that women were sexy in jeans and jackets. Or maybe the plaid jackets were merely a result of the aforementioned influences of gangsta rap, as well as the grunge and alternative rock movements, on the fashion trends of the time. The resurgence of the plaid shirt, at first seen as a symbol of gang affiliation, then as a symbol for dispossessed Generation X teenagers, was eventually incorporated as a unisex fashion for men and women.

Overall, this release marked some very necessary changes in the group. The trio changed record labels and management, as well as their look, and they kept making money. Yet there were more changes to come. Only two years after signing with London Records, they signed a new contract in 1995 with MCA Music Entertainment. Unfortunately, their back catalogue remained with London Records, but the new contract did serve to establish Salt-N-Pepa’s record label, Jireh Records, which allowed the group to sign four acts to their label each year for four years.

Following in the footsteps of Salt-N-Pepa, many female rappers have since established their own record labels in an effort to have greater control over their careers. Some of the most popular and successful of these female-run record labels include Lil’ Kim’s Queen Bee Records and Missy Elliot’s Gold Mind Label. Missy Elliot not only has her own label, she also writes and produces most of her songs.

It was in order to gain this sort of independence that the group left London Records. Salt-N-Pepa wanted a long-term commitment from an established record label, which was very difficult for female rap artists to find. However, given the fact that Salt-N-Pepa had been in the business for over a decade, they felt entitled to some security. So, after several years with their MCA contract and no albums released, Salt-N-Pepa and their new manager, Darryll Brooks, went looking for another label to buy out their contract with MCA. The end result was that Salt-N-Pepa’s fifth and final album, Brand New (1997), was worked and released through three record companies.

Thus, it would appear that Salt-N-Pepa had finally achieved a level of success that allowed them complete creative control over their recording careers and musical product and also provided them with the somewhat
fleeting opportunity to form their own record label. Although gaining their independence was a long and difficult process, the trio persevered and eventually found a new manager and several new labels through which they would release their final album.

**BRAND NEW**

The group officially signed with Red Ant Entertainment in 1997. Unfortunately, Red Ant lacked distribution rights, so the label approached London Records for a distribution contract. Island Black Music, a division of London Records and Island Records, entered the deal because their sales and promotion staff were shared between London Records and Island Black Music.

Ernst was not involved in any aspect of this album, although he nonetheless collected one third of the royalties. The title is very revealing because, for Cheryl and Sandi, this album was a brand new start for their careers, now that they finally possessed full creative control of their music and image. The album took a year to make, and most of it was written and produced by Cheryl and Sandi in Cheryl’s basement. In fact, nine of the thirteen songs were cowritten and coproduced by Cheryl.

*Brand New* was the final album with new material to be released by Salt-N-Pepa. Lyrically it was also the most politically conscious and empowering of their albums. Musically, the breadth and scope of the album was eclectic, ranging from the gospel song “Hold On,” which featured Kirk Franklin, to “Imagine,” featuring rock vocalist Sheryl Crow. The album certainly expanded their musical repertoire. There were also plenty of songs that continued the Salt-N-Pepa tradition of female self-empowerment, such as “Do Me Right” and “The Clock Is Tickin’.”

“Do Me Right” lets women know that if their man is not treating them right, they should leave him. The song urges women to place their needs first, and if their needs are not being met they should find a new relationship. Instead of condoning fun and one-night stands, the trio, all with families of their own, focus on a more serious message for their female fans.

Following this more serious trend in their lyrics is the track “The Clock Is Tickin’.” This song is directed primarily at women, yet it is also directed at men. It deals with the somber issue of abuse, both verbal and physical, and it urges women to leave abusive relationships, both for their own sake and the sake of any children they may have. The song also has a message for men in that it suggests men leave superficial relationships when their female partners are only interested in their money.

Other songs maintained the Salt-N-Pepa tradition of promoting assertive black female sexuality. Specifically, “Gitty Up” and “Boy Toy” (written and produced by Sandi) are playful songs that place women in control of their sexuality.
From these very diverse track selections, we can also see that a division was becoming more apparent in the group. Although Cheryl and Sandi had always had very different personalities, these differences were becoming more pronounced in terms of the direction each of them wanted to take with their creative product. Whereas Cheryl was more interested in focusing on uplifting gospel types of songs, Sandi wanted to uphold Salt-N-Pepa’s image of fun and playful female sexuality. Such irreconcilable differences eventually led the group to disband.

Furthermore, despite the trio’s combined efforts, this album was the least successful of their releases. In comparison to *Very Necessary*, which went five times platinum, *Brand New* only reached gold. Perhaps the breadth of the album was too eclectic and their fans could no longer relate to the songs. Or maybe it had less to do with Salt-N-Pepa and more to do with changes in the rap music industry and consumer taste.

As noted earlier, the influence of gangsta rap on the hip hop landscape in the mid-1990s cannot be underestimated. In conjunction with a slew of male gangsta rappers, there also emerged a contingent of female rappers who were much edgier and more sexually explicit than the women rappers before them. Although they were undoubtedly influenced by the works of Salt-N-Pepa, these new ladies of rap took representations of female rappers in a whole new direction.

Two of the most influential of these hard-core female rappers were Lil’ Kim, who was associated with the Junior M.A.F.I.A., and Foxy Brown, who was associated with the Firm. With the release of Lil’ Kim’s debut album *Hard Core* (1996) and Foxy Brown’s *Ill Na Na* (1997), there was a new brand of self-assertive and very explicit female sexuality on the market. Their lyrics were raunchier, sexier, and more overt than Salt-N-Pepa’s ever were. With explicitly sexual, as opposed to playful, lyrics, hypersexualized imagery in their music videos, and provocative descriptions of sex in their raps, Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown took female rap artists in a new direction by moving beyond the suggestive lyrics of tracks such as Salt-N-Pepa’s “Push It,” and toward much more explicit lyrics, such as Lil’ Kim’s “Big Momma Thang” from *Hard Core*, and Foxy Brown’s “Ill Na Na” from her album *Ill Na Na*. This may be why Salt-N-Pepa could not or, more realistically, did not want to compete with them.

Nonetheless, although Salt-N-Pepa did not lyrically compete with these up-and-coming divas, their music and that of other female rap pioneers nevertheless influenced them. As Rob Marriott notes, Lil’ Kim followed in the footsteps of female rappers before her, such as Salt-N-Pepa on “I’ll Take Your Man,” Roxanne Shanté on “Have a Nice Day,” and MC Lyte on “Stop, Look and Listen,” by struggling to define herself outside of the confines of a male-centered gaze (138). Foxy Brown explicitly credits Roxanne Shanté as one of her idols, and she notes that Shanté is “a pioneer for the type of shit I’m doing. I swear by her” (quoted in D. Smith 122).
ON THEIR OWN (1999 AND AFTER)

After the release of *Brand New*, Cheryl told Sandi and Deidre that she did not want to do any more albums with the group operating the way it was. Cheryl was now interested in working solely on inspirational and gospel music, since during the course of her musical career she had undergone a very significant spiritual journey on which she became a born-again Christian. Unfortunately, her change in outlook was not shared by Sandi, and the three went their separate ways after a final tour in 1999. Salt-N-Pepa officially disbanded in 2002, after the release of a greatest hits album in 2000, *The Best of Salt-N-Pepa*.

After their final tour in 1999, Cheryl married her longtime partner and father of her two children, Gavin Wray, in 2000. Working with Wray, who was an up-and-coming producer, she wanted to pursue a career in gospel rap music, so they began working on her debut solo album, *Salt of the Earth* [*Matthew 5:13*]. Unfortunately, this album would not come to fruition. In 2005, Salt’s homepage, www.saltunrapped.com, announced her plans to release a new solo album, *Salt Unrapped*, but it has yet to be released. Her homepage describes the album’s genre as “urban inspirational.”

Sandi married Treach of Naughty by Nature, a rap group originally from East Orange, New Jersey, and the group consisted of Anthony “Treach” Criss, Vinnie Brown, and Keir “Kay-Gee” Gist. Brown and Gist were originally in a group called New Style, but they changed their name once they joined forces with Criss. With their name change and with help from fellow New Jersey native Queen Latifah, who is one of the few female rappers to successfully introduce a male rap act into the business, Naughty by Nature released their self-titled debut album in 1991. The track from this album for which they are most often remembered is the pop-rap radio hit “O.P.P.,” which has the double meaning of “Other People’s Property” as well as “Other People’s Pussy.” Sandi had met Treach in 1991 in Daytona Beach while shooting *MTV’s Spring Break*. The couple divorced a year after they were married, but they share custody of their daughter, Egypt. More recently, Sandi was part of *The Surreal Life*’s season five cast (2005). Deidre is now an online music personality for the Los Angeles radio station KKBT 100.3 The Beat, where she hosts *The Spin Cycle* with DJ Mo’ Dav.

THE LEGACY OF SALT-N-P EPA

On September 22, 2005, Salt-N-Pepa reunited for the first time in six years and performed “Whatta Man” with En Vogue on VH1’s *Hip-Hop Honors* program. In an interview for the VH1 program, Cheryl succinctly summarized the career and legacy of Salt-N-Pepa when she stated that “we’ve always
been about being powerful as females and demanding our respect and wanting to be heard.” During the program, Salt-N-Pepa was honored as a hip hop legend, along with other greats such as LL Cool J, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Ice-T, Notorious B.I.G., Big Daddy Kane, and the cast of *Boyz N the Hood*. Salt-N-Pepa was the only female rap group to be honored during the program.

According to the *VH1 Hip-Hop Honors* Web site, Salt-N-Pepa was honored on the program because they brought “a woman’s perspective to the testosterone realm of hip hop” since they were not “afraid of talking about sex, advocating contraception, or telling a man exactly what to do when it came to the wild thing.” The legacy of Salt-N-Pepa nonetheless lives on in the music of the female rappers who came after them. From Queen Latifah to Yo Yo, T.L.C., Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, Missy Elliott, and others, the centrality of rapping from a female point of view lives on.

The female point of view for Salt-N-Pepa often involved the themes of self-empowerment and female sexuality, which are present in the music of their successors. For example, on tracks such as Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y.” and Yo Yo’s “Sisterland,” the themes of self-love and solidarity among women are emphasized. In terms of female sexuality, although the “hard-core” sexuality of Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown is much more pronounced than the playful and suggestive sexuality of Salt-N-Pepa, what is of central importance is that female sexuality is openly discussed in the lyrics of female rappers, thereby providing an outlet and space for women to discuss issues related to women’s health, desires, and sexuality. Finally, female rappers such as Missy Elliott and Lil’ Kim have been able to build upon the inroads made by Salt-N-Pepa in terms of creative control, and they have successfully created their own record companies.

Thus, the influence and legacy of Salt-N-Pepa for present-day female rappers is most pronounced in terms of the focus on rapping from a female point of view, the emphasis on the subject matter of women’s issues such as self-empowerment and sexuality, and the increased gains in terms of creative control of the musical product. Although each of the aforementioned female artists have taken rap music in different directions, they all owe a small part of their success to the pioneers and rap icons that are Salt-N-Pepa—one of the first and most successful all-female rap acts of all time.

*See also:* Missy-Elliot, Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Lil’ Kim, Roxanne Shanté

**WORKS CITED**


**FURTHER RESOURCES**


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY


Although she is currently devoting most of her time to a flourishing film career, Queen Latifah will perhaps always be best known for her role in the world of hip hop. Bursting onto the music scene in the late 1980s, Queen Latifah made a name for herself in a number of respects. A talented young rapper, Latifah released songs brimming with a sense of confidence and black female empowerment. She was not the first female rapper and some would argue that she is hardly the greatest, but her success is notable for a number
of reasons. Independent, business-savvy, and fiercely proud of her gender, her race, and her roots, Latifah brought a new sense of positivity to rap and became a role model almost instantly (see sidebar: Overcoming the Stereotypes: Women in Hip Hop).

Overcoming the Stereotypes: Women in Hip Hop
Faiza Hirji

When Queen Latifah first appeared on the musical scene, she was still a mere teenager, but her appearance spoke of maturity and authority. Full-figured, dressed in Afrocentric-tinged clothing that ranged from military uniforms to tracksuits, Latifah was almost immediately categorized as an earth mother type. Less visible factors likely played a role: the title Queen, the self-sufficiency employed in managing her career, and the lyrics that spoke of women’s importance as mothers and caretakers of society.

While Latifah has occasionally expressed discontent with this image, it has not been easy to discard, despite her acquisition of longer hair, makeup, and glamorous clothing. Women in music often occupy certain set roles. In particular, the world of hip hop has not been open to a large number of different interpretations of women’s personalities. Even if Latifah had possessed the physical characteristics to occupy the kind of sexy vamp role played by young rappers such as Foxy Brown and Lil’ Kim, she was firm from the beginning of her career that she had no intention of doing so. She has spoken out about the portrayal of young women as “hos” in music videos, expressing disappointment with the rappers who choose to surround themselves with such images and with those young women who lack sufficient self-respect to reject such positions. As she once noted in a CNN interview, “Just because some rappers choose to sell sex—I’m a big woman and I’m not going to embarrass myself by pulling my gut out. I can be sexy and sensual in my own way. . . . besides, I think big chicks rule” (Mayo 56).

Big chicks may rule, but they are also frequently labeled as mammies, as in the type made famous by Hattie McDaniel in Gone with the Wind. While Latifah’s caretaker-style roles in Bringing Down the House and Chicago are more racy than Scarlett’s mammy or Gimme a Break’s Nell, they are also tinged with a hint of the sexualized black woman. However, for the most part, she has avoided being pigeonholed in any of the media categories so often assigned to black women, such as those of “chickenheads”—women who are easily persuaded to perform sexual acts, particularly oral sex—criminals, or young single mothers, although her tough-talking characters do recall some of those intimidating black mothers who have ruled both the small and big screens, from Patti LaBelle on A Different World to those protective mothers who block progress in inspirational films such as Lean on Me and Coach Carter. However, the strength of her character and her body has also meant that she has sometimes been characterized as someone who does not fit into heterosexual
Queen Latifah established an Afrocentric, positive approach, offering words of praise and encouragement for black women while avoiding criticism of black men. As comfortable as she was within a circle of male friends, Latifah was clear in her belief that women needed to hear a positive message. Well aware of the consequences of living in an environment that denigrated black women, Latifah drew on her knowledge of black history and her own pride in her people to craft songs that would inspire her sisters to be their best. Two songs on this theme helped establish her place as an icon: “Ladies First,” a duet with Monie Love from Latifah’s 1989 debut album, *All Hail the Queen*, and “U.N.I.T.Y,” a Grammy-winning classic from 1993’s *Black Reign*.

The subject matter of her music distinguished Latifah from other hip hop artists, but so did the fact that she lived as she rapped. An around-the-way girl who seemed most comfortable in track suits, Latifah avoided the materialism and emphasis on appearance that came to define the hip hop industry. Filming her first videos and appearing in public wearing outfits she had cobbled together as cheaply as possible, this Queen was one who opted for comfort first—not only in terms of her clothes, but in terms of herself (see sidebar: True to Their Roots: Afrocentric Fashion). MTV had never seen anything like her, and neither had most fans. While other major female stars reacted to media attention and record company pressure by slimming and stripping down, Latifah remained at peace with her shape and her persona, helping to set the stage for the success of later stars such as Missy Elliott. Even later in her career, when she began to appear in movies and in public wearing more feminine, sophisticated ensembles, Latifah did not follow through with the strict diets or training regimens adopted by so many of her counterparts. The result? Ironically, the woman who became a powerful role model for young women by refusing to conform to societal standards of beauty and slenderness was rewarded with a contract to serve as a Cover Girl spokesmodel.

Ironies such as these seem to say it all: Latifah’s life represents a series of paradoxes, yet there are definite, consistent truths. Even when she seems to stray from her roots—putting movies before music, adopting a softer, jazzy

**Work Cited**

True to Their Roots: Afrocentric Fashion

Faiza Hirji

Queen Latifah has left behind many of the Afrocentric themes found in her earlier music as well as the clothing that characterized those years. Fashion has often been an important part of rap, supporting verbal messages through appearance. As a member of Native Tongues, the collective endorsing peaceful activism, equality, and pride in their African roots, Latifah adopted many of the same fashions and interests of fellow members such as A Tribe Called Quest, X Clan, De La Soul, and Jungle Brothers.

Leaving aside her sincere interest in the African diaspora and African history, Latifah also had a more practical reason for cultivating an Afrocentric look when she first arrived on the scene: It was cheap. This was important for a fledgling rapper, and for one who agreed with her Native Tongues brethren that it was necessary to move away from the materialism and conspicuous consumption that characterized many hip hop artists. Latifah and her partners rejected the flashy gold jewelry and supposedly ghetto-appropriate attire that was becoming popular, choosing instead to wear clothes similar to those favored by the Black Power movement. Kente cloth and dashikis were popular, as well as the black, green, gold, and red that evoked a number of African flags, and some rappers added dreadlocks or Afros rather than cultivating a straight-haired, quasi-European look.

The Afrocentric look was particularly pronounced in X Clan, known for militant activism. They could frequently be seen in dashikis and kofi hats. Although Jungle Brothers and A Tribe Called Quest were less overt in their Afrocentric fashion than X Clan, they did utilize African colors and motifs on their early albums, a trend that eventually faded away.

Latifah, generally casual and relaxed in her attire, nonetheless became a type of fashion icon in her own way during her Afrocentric period, even making an appearance at a 1991 Todd Oldham show wearing a very regal kufi, described by Wilbekin as “an African crown that looks like a tube of fabric on your head” (280). This look became her trademark in her early videos and appearances, projecting not only her connections to Africa but the royal lineage of African women. This image defined the cover of her early albums, disappearing only with the release of 1998’s Order in the Court.

De La Soul also carved out a niche for themselves with a style that seemed to be both Afrocentric and hippie at the same time, including items such as brightly colored shirts, tie-dye, baggy pants, and medallions. Eventually De La Soul, however, like Latifah, moved away from that image, crafting a new style of music and a less African-inspired mode of dress.

While stars such as Latifah have changed styles, and Native Tongues has dissolved, Afrocentrism is hardly a thing of the past. Stars such as Erykah Badu, for instance, carry on the tradition proudly, sporting an appearance different from that made famous by Queen Latifah but still with some African
distinctiveness, including head coverings and loose dresses. The look has changed but the principle lives on.

Work Cited


vocal style, trading in the track suits and runners for haute couture—Latifah continues to retain her independence, her control, and her desire to blaze trails in unexplored territory. Perhaps one of her most pioneering qualities is her business sense, a rare trait in an industry where starstruck teenagers are so excited to receive recording contracts that they often surrender control of their music. It is even rarer for a woman in a business where men dominate; many successful female singers have therefore achieved status by linking themselves to a male partner, platonic or otherwise. Surrounded by men that she loved, and turning over her business affairs to one particularly reliable male friend, Latifah never lost sight of who she was in any relationship.

Latifah presented herself with professionalism, even in the midst of tragedy, and maintained control over her image and her rights. Unlike some of her contemporaries, she did not allow herself to be sucked into the vortex of the music industry, even when Tommy Boy passed on the opportunity to renew her initial contract and she had to move over to Motown. Along with her insistence on investing her money wisely, Latifah has resisted the temptations of excessive consumerism. While she is perhaps one of the most successful hip hop artists of all time, she has not displayed her wealth with the same enthusiasm as many of her contemporaries, who flaunt diamonds and gold in their videos as a symbol of having made it to the top. She has had her run-ins with the law, but these are minor in comparison to the legal battles, not to mention physical battles, that dog some of her fellow rappers.

Strong, independent, and personable, Latifah dealt with hip hop’s short shelf life by moving outside of its boundaries. The firsts that she piled up in her music—the feminist power of “Ladies First,” the gold status of Black Reign, the formation of her own company, Flavor Unit—were merely a prelude to the barriers she broke down in a career as an actress and all-around performer. She has built a rich body of film work, distinguished by stellar appearances in Set It Off, the award-winning Chicago, and Bringing Down the House, allowing her to move beyond the cliché of the singer who wants to be a movie star. Having demonstrated her range, Queen Latifah can now settle comfortably into a role as someone who is famous for a variety of accomplishments. Singer, actress, soul sister, celebrity spokesmodel—Latifah’s range and determination combine to make her an indisputable hip hop icon. Even though her most recent work does not always demonstrate her
rapping roots, the story of Latifah’s life is that of a woman whose queenly stature owes a great deal—if not everything—to hip hop and to her own overflowing confidence. She may be better known now as a movie star, among other things, but the fact is that there could not have been a Queen without hip hop, and without the Queen, hip hop would have been denied one of its rare female pioneers. Queen Latifah has distanced herself from the rap world, becoming part of hip hop’s storied past more than its present or future, although she continues to make music in a softer, gentler vein. However, her legacy lives on in the inspiration she provides at a number of levels: as an entrepreneur who has enjoyed a long and diverse career, as a woman who is unafraid to stake her claim to success, and as a rapper who spoke out about inequality and injustice when those words most needed to be said. Her moves into the mainstream have had the rather paradoxical effect of promoting some of the same notions she once eschewed, as contemporary female rappers embark with enthusiasm on acting careers, sometimes with little regard to the quality of the roles or the depth of their own talent, in order to make money and to maximize the benefits of a career that might not last. Despite the efforts Latifah made early in her career to instill pride and respect in hip hop gender relations, there are still negative references to women in rap songs and videos, and a new breed of female rappers who seem to embrace the oversexualized images that Latifah spoke against. Many women in hip hop, however, continue to cite Latifah as a role model, one who has carried on the legacy of the early female rappers and added to it.

ALL HAIL THE QUEEN—THE EARLY YEARS

The woman who would be queen of hip hop was born Dana Elaine Owens in Newark, New Jersey, on March 18, 1970. Queen Latifah helped place New Jersey on the hip hop map. A neglected outpost at a time when most of the success stories seemed to be coming out of New York City, New Jersey has always been home to Latifah, and her music was one of the biggest hip hop stories ever to emerge from there, even though New Jersey can also lay claim to bringing up stars such as Ice-T, Lauryn Hill, Redman, and Naughty by Nature.

While she was slow in arriving—so slow that labor had to be induced after ten months—that was the last time Dana would be caught dawdling. Unlike many other female rap pioneers, she enjoyed the stability and support of a close-knit and loving family, investing her with the confidence to pursue whatever she desired. Her mother, Rita, a high school teacher, was a particularly strong influence and source of encouragement, instilling ambition in the two young children she raised essentially alone after separating from her husband, Lancelot.

Rita and Lancelot Owens separated in 1978, leaving Dana and her brother Lancelot Jr., better known as Winki, in the custody of Rita, who moved the
family to less affluent surroundings as she worked to support her children. Lancelot, a Vietnam veteran and former police officer who was battling an addiction to drugs, was unable to help consistently and became a less central figure in Dana’s life, but nonetheless she has noted the many ways in which her father remained a positive force. Like Rita, Lancelot was raised among strong women and saw no reason why Dana should be less empowered than her brother. He attempted to provide both children with equally sharp instincts for survival and encouraged Dana’s eagerness to accompany her brother in his athletic pursuits. Thus, despite teasing from neighborhood children who referred to her as a tomboy, Dana developed a diverse set of interests, from karate, basketball, and baseball to dance and music lessons. She also learned how to tolerate teasing and to combat it with cool self-possession, informing her young critics that she was entitled to her athleticism.

By the age of eight, Dana had already decided that she would benefit from a name change, spurred by the fact that many of her friends and relatives were adopting Muslim names. With the help of her cousin, Dana chose Latifah. She felt that its meaning—beautiful and sensitive—was entirely apt. Although she was so evidently strong and athletic, and had developed a tough exterior to handle any challenges that came her way, her inner, gentle self was best described by the name Latifah. Latifah, then, was not only a rap persona but a name that arose originally out of a desire to create a clear and self-defined identity.

Ever versatile, Latifah demonstrated her Renaissance qualities early, playing basketball for her high school’s state championship-winning team, starring as Dorothy in the school production of The Wiz, and in her spare time, rapping—independently and within a group called Ladies Fresh. She was immersed in the music scene in other ways, visiting New York City clubs to see the famous and the up-and-coming. Surreptitious visits to the Latin Quarter with her friends provided her with an impeccable background in hip hop, as she took in shows featuring performers ranging from Grandmaster Flash to the Beastie Boys to MC Lyte. However, as interested as she was in music, it was not initially her ambition to forge a career in that field. Instead, bearing in mind her mother’s emphasis on education, Latifah stayed in school, considering the possibility of becoming a journalist or a lawyer.

Ironically, it was actually Rita Owens who provided Latifah with the introduction that would further stoke her interest in rap music. As the person responsible for social activities at Irvington High School, Rita met Mark the 45 King when she needed a DJ for a school party. The subsequent introduction to the 45 King marked a turning point in Latifah’s life, as she began spending much of her spare time with him and his friends, experimenting with music and testing out her own rapping skills. While her early attempts were, by her own admission, less than stellar, her interest was sparked, and when some of her friends formed a group Latifah was part of it, labeling herself Princess of the Posse.
It was the inspiration provided by a couple other princesses, however, that really gave Latifah the impetus for a rapping career. On her visits to the Latin Quarter and to clubs and house parties in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Harlem, she rarely saw female rappers, and the ones she did see were sometimes difficult to identify with for a young woman who felt most at ease in athletic clothing. Two women would change that for her in a single night. A performance by Sweet T and Jazzy Joyce resonated with Latifah, who saw them as female rappers who were talented and successful, and who had maintained their own casual look. With this in mind, she began to consider the possibility that rap, rather than detracting from her career goals, could enhance them, offering her another means of communicating with an audience.

At that point, however, Latifah needed to have an audience before she could consider the best mode of communication. As would be the case throughout most of her career, her friends, like her family members, believed in and supported her efforts. A longtime friend insisted that she accept a loan—which he himself could ill afford—in order to cut a demo. Buoyed by his support, Latifah followed instructions, collaborating with Mark the 45 King on a record for “Princess of the Posse” and “Wrath of My Madness,” in which she made reference both to the 45 King and Ramsey while injecting a reggae sound that few others were using at the time in their rapping. “Princess of the Posse” went on to become her first single to garner radio play, appearing in the summer of 1987. That same demo put her on the path to a recording career, as the 45 King passed it on to Fab 5 Freddy of Yo! MTV Raps, who then passed it on to Monica Lynch at Tommy Boy Records. Lynch was interested enough to offer Latifah a contract, and after that there was no looking back.

It was around this time that Latifah adopted the Queen moniker, a natural step in the midst of a wave of Afrocentric consciousness that acknowledged African history, the dignity of a people oppressed by slavery, and the nationalism and pride of leaders such as Malcolm X. On “Princess of the Posse” and “Wrath of My Madness,” the only name she provided was Latifah. It was only later, when Tommy Boy offered her a contract and her lawyer wanted to know what name she would employ professionally that Latifah decided to use something more elaborate. Out of respect for those African queens, such as Nefertiti and Numidia, who occupied a strong, nurturing role as the foremothers of an ancient civilization, she chose the name Queen Latifah.

**QUEEN ON THE SCENE—THE LATIFAH BREAKTHROUGH**

In 1989, Queen Latifah, still a teenager, captured the rap world’s attention with her debut album, *All Hail the Queen*, released by Tommy Boy and produced by Mark the 45 King. As she had foreseen, the kind of communication she learned at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, where she
studied for a year and a half, did not have quite the impact of her rhyming skills. *All Hail the Queen* included a number of landmark songs, but the one that engraved Latifah’s image in the public consciousness as a female rapper who was serious about her message was the single “Ladies First,” a duet with the young British rapper Monie Love.

Born Simone Wilson in the same year as Dana Owens, Monie Love did not reach the same heights of popularity as Latifah. Nonetheless, Love was one of a very small number of British rappers who achieved some kind of name recognition in the United States, and her contribution to “Ladies First,” using a very different rapping and personal style than Latifah, was both significant and memorable. Her own work, best exemplified by catchy singles such as “Monie in the Middle” and “It’s a Shame (My Sister),” featured the same kind of strength and warmth directed toward women that made “Ladies First” a standout. “Ladies First” would be one of the signature songs of Love’s career, which she has kept on the musical path by establishing herself as a radio deejay. As for Latifah, the choice of Love as a partner on “Ladies First” was especially significant in that her heritage as a British woman of Afro-Caribbean ancestry demonstrated the song’s universality and reach.

With Latifah presenting a powerful image in the accompanying video, dressed in different types of African clothing that alternately depicted her as earth mother and military general, Love’s honeyed lyrics and Latifah’s tough talk offered a powerful and uplifting tribute to black history and black women. The two teenagers rapped together, supported by other female vocalists, while the background featured one significant black woman after another, going back in time and all over the African diaspora. From Angela Davis to Sojourner Truth, from the United States to South Africa, powerful images of black solidarity and struggle lit up the screen. “Ladies First” made it clear that the young Latifah expected to be taken seriously, and that she would be different from other youthful female rappers who burst onto the scene with more provocative or less substantial songs. The Afrocentrism of that song and video was one defining feature of the Queen’s early work, and of the work of her closest compatriots.

Latifah’s early work carried extra credibility because of her association with highly respected artists, most of whom had a commitment to promoting pride in their African roots and culture. Afrika Bambaataa, in particular, was a major influence and companion. Viewed by many as the father of hip hop following his transition from street gang member to singer, Bambaataa drew youth of different races and identities into his Zulu Nation, urging them to find positive energy in dance and song. The Zulu Nation was only one of many groups and coalitions that could be found in the world of hip hop, but it was one whose message never lost its relevance to Latifah.

Emerging at a time when negative images of African Americans, especially women, could be found everywhere, “Ladies First” reminded listeners and viewers that there was a lot more to members of the African diaspora than the
negative images that made it onto the news. It also offered an image of African American women in hip hop that was far different from the scantily clad young women who are criticized even now for their willingness to expose themselves to denigration in rap videos. Covered up and taking care of business, Queen Latifah and Monie Love made it clear they would by no means be relegated to the background as supporting actors.

Another defining feature was her refusal to engage in the infighting that had driven—and to some extent still drives—the careers of other female rap stars, such as Roxanne Shanté, the Real Roxanne, and MC Lyte in earlier days, and Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown in more recent ones. The so-called dis records, stinging personal criticisms aimed both at male critics and at other women, which helped Shanté and the Real Roxanne establish themselves professionally, gained a great deal of fame for both, but also meant that female rap stars suffered from a profound sense of alienation. Engaged in insulting one another on vinyl, Shanté, the Real Roxanne, and MC Lyte were only three of the best-known early rappers who were unable to build a sense of community or unity, instead feeding their own fears and insecurities.

This was not, of course, the only barrier such rappers faced. They were not only female, a drawback in the world of hip hop all by itself, but they were young and often vulnerable. Many came from broken homes or poor backgrounds; for some, it became increasingly difficult to pursue an education; most lacked positive role models. It was common for these rappers to be exploited by managers and promoters once they did land recording contracts, and in the desire to succeed and live up to the expectations of their record companies, it is perhaps not surprising that these young women attempted to attract attention any way they could. Given the many obstacles these women faced, the surprise is not that many of them had short careers; the real surprise is how long some of them lasted. Although Latifah would go on to have a longer and more stable career, she owed those pioneers a debt for breaking down some of the first barriers.

As inspiring as the female rap pioneers might have been for Latifah in some sense, the pattern of hurling insults at her contemporaries was not one she intended to follow. From the beginning, in keeping with her association with an Afrocentric movement grounded in principles of pride and positivity, Latifah decided that she was going to carve a different niche for herself. Her message of empowerment was intended for all black women, competitors or not, and was relatively easy to embrace at a mainstream level because of her avoidance of profanity or perceived negativity. It was this message that set Queen Latifah apart, making her one of the few women to attain iconic status in the masculine world of hip hop. Her cultural significance far outstripped her commercial success.

Commercially and culturally, Latifah helped begin a tradition that continues today in the rap world. Whereas the earliest rap successes came out of New York City, a place that influenced Latifah and others, New Jersey was
barely on the map in musical terms in the late 1980s. Latifah would hardly be the last major artist with New Jersey roots to explode onto the scene, but she was certainly one of the first. Although some of her albums were subject to a spottier reception than *All Hail the Queen*, she had already begun the process of making her name—and that name belonged to a young woman whose roots were unapologetically Jersey. Even when the demands of her acting career compelled her to begin splitting time between California and New Jersey, Latifah has proudly proclaimed that her true home remains the one of her childhood.

*All Hail the Queen* sold a million copies globally and achieved Top 10 placement on R&B lists, carried not only by the strength of “Ladies First” but by other notable songs such as the fun-loving “Come into My House,” which invites listeners into her queendom and nation, and “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children,” a duet with De La Soul that makes oblique reference to the Zulu Nation and the family ties it contained. The rasta-infused “Wrath of My Madness”—which spoke of Latifah’s talent, confidence, and friends, but also of her belief in black unity—and the self-affirming “Princess of the Posse,” those first songs that captured Tommy Boy’s attention, were also on the album. Songs such as “The Evil That Men Do,” with KRS-One making references to apartheid and political neglect, further demonstrated her interest in social and political issues affecting the African American community. “The Evil That Men Do” addressed the numerous challenges faced by black women on welfare, from the indifference of those who could make a difference to the threat of drugs and the lack of housing. The hard-hitting nature of the lyrics on songs such as “Ladies First” and “The Evil That Men Do” inspired other community-minded rappers, including the far more controversial Sister Souljah (Keyes 268). *Nature of a Sista’,* her 1991 follow-up, was considered by some to be less substantial, and Tommy Boy’s response was to decline the opportunity to renew Latifah’s contract when it expired, despite the fact that singles such as “Latifah’s Had It up 2 Here” performed well. The defiant tone of that song, in which Latifah addressed criticism and rumor by asserting her command of any situation, seemed an appropriate prelude to her break with the record label that launched her career. Some have suggested that Tommy Boy grew wary of dealing with Latifah because of her preference for running the show her way and including an unexpected level of variety in the songs on her albums. Regardless of the reason, the outcome seemed to be positive for Latifah, who went on to create a hit album for Motown.

Queen Latifah was not the first female rapper to have widespread popularity. Others such as Salt-N-Pepa were also making waves, but again, Latifah’s ability to carve out a niche for herself saved her from unfair comparisons. While Salt-N-Pepa attracted occasional fire for being, in the eyes of some, too mainstream and too popular, Latifah’s early work carried extra credibility for its associations with, among others, Afrika Bambaataa, the trailblazing rapper whose Zulu Nation collective included, in addition to
Latifah, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and the Jungle Brothers. These members, in addition to Monie Love, were also members of the Native Tongues Posse, which came to be regarded by some as a family with Afrika Bambaataa and Queen Latifah at its head. An American whose mother came from Barbados, Afrika Bambaataa was always conscious of the need to spread a message not only within North America but across the diaspora, a message that resisted racism and encouraged investment in the future. Musically, these rappers all created fresh and innovative work at some point, but their other common ground lay in a shared belief that rap was not simply an entertainment vehicle—it was, as Latifah had hoped from the first, a way of raising consciousness without falling into the trap of promoting violence, consumerism, and misogyny.

Native Tongues was a strong and creative force while it lasted, and for some time many of its members experienced considerable success. A Tribe Called Quest and Queen Latifah did very well commercially, but they were perhaps not the members with the most intense investment in Afrocentricism. Afrika Bambaataa worked hard to maintain everyone’s commitment, but as time went on, the members drifted apart. There was no major rift or pivotal incident, merely a sense that each person or group was growing into an individual career, separate from the collective. Eventually the Jungle Brothers would go on to release an album in 1993—following some reported interference from Bambaataa, who tried to influence the record’s sound—that clearly showed how far they had moved from strictly Afrocentric themes, while De La Soul released an album the same year that made oblique and negative references to the dissolution of the Native Tongues. They retracted those on a subsequent album, but by that time, Native Tongues was no longer the force it had been, and even if it was, Latifah had moved on to her own projects and to different themes. Unlike some female rappers who could not sustain their careers without the support of a male crew, Latifah benefited from her association with Native Tongues but maintained her momentum after the group’s meltdown.

Latifah was also different from her female colleagues in one other, significant respect. Unlike young stars such as Shanté or Salt-N-Pepa, Latifah maintained creative and financial control as early and as often as possible. Realizing early on that she needed someone to collect from promoters, Latifah assigned a reliable friend and kept close track of what was happening. Younger stars who arrived earlier on the scene, such as Shanté, often struggled to collect what they were owed. Youth was not the only factor—some of those rappers lacked a sufficient base of supportive advisors who would manage their funds honestly and fairly, while personal stresses and the distraction of being on the road, pushed from venue to venue, also sapped some of the energy needed to inquire closely about their affairs. A number of female rappers, such as Salt of Salt-N-Pepa, also fell into the trap of surrendering their management to lovers, only to realize later what complications
could ensue. Blazing a trail for equally strong and smart successors such as Missy Elliott—who refers to Latifah as a friend and role model—Latifah managed her own business affairs or delegated them to trusted members of her family, such as her mother, or to longtime friend Shakim Compere, who had been a former student of Rita’s and eventually became one of Latifah’s closest companions. Always quick to recognize financial implications, she was careful to trademark the Queen Latifah name as well.

Demonstrating her fearlessness in the face of opposition, she moved over to Motown when Tommy Boy lost interest after *Nature of a Sista*. The jump to Motown meant leaving behind some of her longtime allies, including the 45 King, whose skills were not considered essential by Motown, but it didn’t mean that Latifah gave up all of her creative control or her interest in working with friends. In the 1990s, Latifah established her own record label and management company, Flavor Unit, which referred to a posse of New York and New Jersey rappers such as Chill Rob G, Storm P, and Apache. Among the acts she discovered and managed for Flavor Unit was Naughty by Nature, whose hugely successful debut album featured Latifah as executive producer, rapping on the song “Wickedest Man Alive.” Naughty by Nature returned some of Latifah’s favors, acknowledging her in their songs and acting as producers on *Nature of a Sista*. Although Naughty by Nature made its name with the lighthearted “O.P.P.,” many of their other songs were powerful anthems for black pride and progress in the face of indignity and injustice. Much of their work resonated with the same themes as those favored by Native Tongues, and several of their records included some mention of Native Tongues and Zulu Nation, including their Grammy-winning 1995 album, *Poverty’s Paradise*. Flavor Unit’s roster would eventually include artists such as Outkast, Next, and LL Cool J, and some of the artists loaned their talents on one another’s albums. Once again, Latifah’s mother, always a powerful force in her life, assumed an important role at Flavor Unit, serving as its vice president, while Shakim Compere served as Latifah’s business partner in Flavor Unit and other ventures.

While Queen Latifah has refused to describe herself as a feminist, she does espouse clearly feminist ideals, promoting female strength wherever possible. When describing the motivation behind songs such as “Ladies First,” Latifah has noted the level of distress and puzzlement she experienced when she realized that the sexism in hip hop was becoming more acceptable to female rappers as well as male ones. Female rappers began embracing negative labels for themselves and other women, a development that Latifah observed critically. Rather than attacking the men of hip hop, Latifah’s response was to nurture the self-esteem of her female compatriots. If she could build up their consciousness, she felt, then empowerment and respect would follow. Given her investment in a sense of sisterhood, it was no surprise that she was a participant in a 1991 concert called Sisters in the Name of Rap, a nationally televised hip hop event featuring thirteen female rappers, including
Salt-N-Pepa, MC Lyte, Nefertiti, Yo Yo, and Shanté. Despite the fact that the Queen’s image has changed substantially over the years, from tough-talking Afrocentric rapper to glamorous jazz-singing actress, Latifah’s dedication to social activism seems consistent. Her pride in her culture and her gender made her a natural, articulate spokeswoman at events organized to support charitable efforts or social activism.

Although “Ladies First” remains, perhaps, the defining song of the Queen’s career, a close second would have to be “U.N.I.T.Y.,” the Grammy-winning call to arms that condemned the misogyny for which hip hop is so often criticized. Preaching love for black men and black women alike, the song also let both know in no uncertain terms that disrespect and name calling are unacceptable. Offering tough solutions for men who treat women as sexual objects or who take out their frustrations on them, “U.N.I.T.Y.” reminded black women to keep their pride and self-respect in the most difficult of situations. Moreover, it returned to some of the themes that were so important in “Ladies First,” emphasizing again the unity needed within the African American community and the power such unity provides. Aside from the Grammy for Rap Solo Performance, “U.N.I.T.Y.” also garnered an NAACP Image Award and a Soul Train Music Award in 1994. “U.N.I.T.Y.” was the standout single on Latifah’s 1993 *Black Reign* album, a darker and more diverse collection of songs than that found on *All Hail the Queen*, which highlighted social problems but also preached optimism and positivity. *Black Reign*, written during a difficult period in Latifah’s life, reflects some of her moodiness, although the strength of “U.N.I.T.Y.” clearly indicates that her tough, enduring spirit has prevailed through everything.

*Order in the Court*, her 1998 follow-up album, featured an attention-grabbing cover, with spikes of fire erupting from Latifah’s head, but this implied anger is not in major evidence on the record itself. *Order in the Court* did not feature any songs that made the same strong social waves as “Ladies First” or “U.N.I.T.Y.,” instead offering a lighter R&B sound and duets with artists such as Faith Evans. Sales for *Order in the Court* were moderately good, buoyed by popular singles such as “Bananas,” an increasingly rare rap track in which the Queen once again served notice that she wanted respect and reminded competitors that she was in a class of her own, and “Paper,” featuring Pras Michel and Jaz-A-Belle and sampling “I Heard It Through the Grapevine.” A song that garnered less attention was “Black on Black Love,” where Latifah demonstrates that she still has something to say about the social ills affecting her people, and about the lack of unity among them. “Paper,” which raps, in part, about the difficulties of the music business and criticizes MCs who might be trying to interfere in her friendships and imitate her success, is yet another venue where Queen Latifah is frank about the sacrifices needed to succeed. Perhaps it is not surpising, then, that *Order in the Court* represents what could be her last complete album of original rap songs. Released at a time when her television and film career was heating up,
Order in the Court did not enjoy as much critical success as her earlier work, which may reflect the fact that she was beginning a slow drift away from a full-time musical career. The more mellow musical sounds, featuring less rapping, may also have served as a predictor of Latifah’s eventual move toward experimenting with jazz.

Her final original album to date under the Queen Latifah name, *She’s a Queen: A Collection of Hits*, released by Universal in 2002, received tepid critical attention, although it did feature some of her early major songs. In between those major releases, Latifah has also loaned her talents to a number of soundtracks, including *Living Out Loud*, *Bringing Down the House*, *Chicago*, *Set It Off*, *New Jersey Drive*, *Sunset Park*, *Nothing to Lose*, *The Associate*, *White Men Can’t Jump*, and *New Jack City*. She has also been included in a number of collections, including *Queen Latifah and the Original Flavor Unit*, a 1996 collection featuring longtime collaborators such as Lakim Shabazz, Lord Alibaski, and Apache. Her most recent album taps into the world of jazz she explored in films such as *Living Out Loud*, and is titled simply *The Dana Owens Album*. Although jazz may seem a world apart from *Black Reign* or *All Hail the Queen*, critics were favorably impressed by her range on the *Living Out Loud* soundtrack, and more than one noted that the Latifah tracks were perhaps the best on the entire album. Small wonder, then, that she followed up by delivering a complete album dedicated to jazz. The departure from her early work is marked not only by the difference in sound, but by the messages contained. That is to say, there are no real messages from the Queen on *The Dana Owens Albums*, which is a collection of covers, many of which are considered quite good—particularly the wistful “Lush Life”—but none of which deliver the forceful rhymes and frank talk of her rap albums. Although Queen Latifah still performs rap songs in concert, there are few signs that she plans to reposition herself at some point as an original and fearless contributor to the world of rap.

THE HIGHS AND LOWS

If Queen Latifah has changed in terms of her professional focus and musical style, her personal life has been marked forever by one particular transformation. While Latifah’s family continues to provide a strong support base in a number of respects, the loss of one family member was a devastating blow. At first, 1992 started out as one of the best years of her life, marked by a Top 10 single, “Latifah’s Had It up 2 Here,” a Grammy nomination, and a bit part in *Jungle Fever*. However, in March, a tragedy transformed that year into one of unimaginable sadness. Latifah’s brother Winki was killed in an accident, riding a motorcycle that she had purchased for him as a birthday gift. The death was unexpected and the grief so sharp that Latifah struggled with depression and confusion for some time after, using alcohol and marijuana...
in an unsuccessful attempt to cope. Only two years apart in age, Latifah and Winki had been close friends as well as siblings, and in many ways he was the man in her life. Her father was an important figure, but his presence was inconsistent. Battling his own demons and lurching from one affair to another, he fathered other children whose existence had taken Latifah and Winki by surprise. Eventually the two learned that they had two half-sisters, Michelle and Kelly, and a half-brother, Angelo. The man who had raised Latifah to be self-sufficient, strong, and confident also proved to be a man who was unfaithful and who concealed the results of his affairs. While Latifah managed to maintain a relationship with her father, she did experience a sense of betrayal that affected not only her faith in her father, but her faith in other men as well.

It was, in part, the example of her father, who struggled constantly with a cocaine addiction, that helped Latifah realize that drugs were not helping her deal with the pain of loss. She decided to seek solace in her music, since she was already contractually obligated to Motown and since work appeared to be therapeutic. On Black Reign, the first album by a female rapper to attain gold status, Latifah was able to discuss her grief and pay tribute to her brother. Released in 1993, the album mentioned Winki in the song “Black Hand Side,” but the key song was “Winki’s Theme,” which allowed Latifah to express her belief that her brother was watching over her and also spoke to her faith in God despite her confusion over what had taken place, as well as her insistence that she would have to continue being herself. The effect was so positive that she suggested the inclusion of a song mentioning Winki might be a trademark on each of her future albums.

Although questions about her sexual orientation have dogged her for years, particularly following her convincing portrayal of the lesbian Cleo in the movie Set It Off, Latifah’s personal life has rarely occupied the popular press in the same way as that of fellow rappers. Her reputation has been mainly impeccable, resulting in a considerable shock for the public when she was pulled over by the police in 1996 for possession of marijuana and a handgun. That brush with the law was followed by another in 2002 when she was pulled over for driving while intoxicated, but while her public may have been disappointed and surprised, Latifah has always been candid about her drug use. Despite eschewing prolonged use or experimentation with the hardest drugs, the rapper went so far as to list the drugs she has tried in her 1999 autobiography.

While Queen Latifah has never attracted the more piercing and strongly critical attention commanded by audacious counterparts such as Lil’ Kim or Foxy Brown, her increasing commercialism and attempts at entering the mainstream have drawn criticism. The Afrocentrism and social commentary that guided her earlier efforts appear to have given way to a desire to be more accessible and more diverse. Although her music is no longer the key component of her career, her most recent collections are far from the fierce battle
cries found in “Ladies First” and “U.N.I.T.Y.” In fact, her decision to release her 2004 collection of jazz and soul songs, The Dana Owens Album, under her given name seems to signal a greater desire than ever to leave behind the Queen Latifah persona. Interestingly, however, the album cover does feature Queen Latifah’s name despite the contrast with the title.

CELLULOID CELEBRITY: THE RAPPER GOES HOLLYWOOD

However, that persona has enjoyed considerable success inside and outside the world of music. Queen Latifah’s early decision to enter the world of acting is hardly unique in the world of hip hop, where pragmatic rappers, particularly female ones, have concluded that a movie or television career may be a boon if the notoriously competitive world of hip hop forces an early end to musical prospects. Latifah’s success, however, has few peers. With her cameo role in Spike Lee’s 1991 hit Jungle Fever, she made a strong foray into territory that no other rappers had entered decisively at that point, following it up swiftly with appearances in House Party 2 and The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, both vehicles for other rappers—Kid ’N Play in the first case and Will Smith in the second.

With her starring role as Khadijah on the Fox situation comedy Living Single, she followed in Smith’s footsteps as a rapper starring in a successful situation comedy (see sidebar: Keep ’Em Laughing: Hip Hop and Sitcoms). Living Single ran from 1993 to 1997, but before that, Latifah appeared as a straight-talking record executive opposite young rising stars Omar Epps and

Keep ’Em Laughing: Hip Hop and Sitcoms
Faiza Hirji

Although the rapper-as-actor scenario has now reached the status of near-cliché, it was still quite unusual when Queen Latifah was selected to headline Living Single, a situation comedy revolving around a group of close, very different friends. Living Single debuted in 1993, and LL Cool J’s In the House debuted in 1995, following on the early nineties success of the show that helped blaze the trail for rappers in sitcoms: Will Smith’s The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Latifah made guest appearances on Fresh Prince before her own foray into television stardom.

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, which can still be found in reruns, had a long and successful run from 1990 to 1996, increasing Will Smith’s profile both as an actor and as a rapper. Fresh Prince, a lighthearted comedy about the cultural clash between an affluent Los Angeles family and their mischievous West Philadelphia-raised nephew, paved the way for a long career. However, Smith’s position at the beginning of Fresh Prince was quite different from that of LL Cool J or Queen Latifah. In many ways, he had no street credibility to lose as he assumed the role of the goofy Will. His musical success had begun even
before Latifah’s, but from a very different platform. His biggest songs, such as “Girls Ain’t Nothing but Trouble” and “Parents Just Don’t Understand” were inoffensive, humorous, and completely apolitical.

The stakes were a bit higher for LL and the Queen. It was the latter who landed a sitcom first, although both rappers had been testing out their acting skills with small film roles. Living Single featured Queen Latifah as a magazine editor whose interactions with her three girlfriends and male neighbors formed the basis of the show. Running 1993-1998 on Fox, the show only seemed to make Latifah more popular, but it also marked a period when music appeared to give way to a focus on acting.

LL Cool J, otherwise known as James Todd Smith, enjoyed a popularity similar to Latifah’s as early as 1984, when he joined forces with the newly emerging Def Jam. His work, ranging from funky to romantic to hard-hitting, was perhaps bolder and more controversial than Will Smith’s, but it was still classified by some as mediocre and unoriginal. Nonetheless, LL racked up sales for records, endorsements, and merchandise, and like Queen Latifah, he always demonstrated solid business sense, trademarking LL Cool J (Ladies Love Cool James) and maintaining a presence in different forms of media and marketing. In the House, which debuted in 1995 on NBC, was his attempt to master yet another medium. The show, also starring Debbie Allen as the head of the family renting from LL’s character, a former football player, was not hugely successful in the ratings, but the support of upstart network UPN kept it on the air until 1999.

UPN has continued to provide a home to hip hop artists in sitcoms, featuring Brandy’s Moesha (1996-2001) and Eve’s self-titled show (2003–present), but few situation comedies featuring rappers have managed to come close to the resounding success that was Fresh Prince, just as very few rappers have attained the kind of acting resume that Will Smith and Queen Latifah have accumulated during their careers.

Tupac Shakur in the gritty urban drama Juice. Although her role was relatively small, it offered a sly nod to music insiders: Playing an industry veteran faced with a bevy of aspiring DJs, Latifah’s character dresses down one such DJ in no uncertain terms before conceding that Epps’s character, the Harlem-based Q, may have some promise despite having only local experience playing for his friends. Having been discovered by a female executive while still a teenager embedded in a New Jersey crew, the Queen may have been enjoying a laugh and some nostalgia in this scene, as well as a subsequent one where Q impresses the audience in his first major audition, a contest hosted by Latifah and featuring an appearance by Fab 5 Freddy, who also contributed to Latifah’s big break.

Whether or not the parallels to Latifah’s industry experience were intended in Juice, her next move took her away from movies set in the world of hip hop
as she accepted a role in the Michael Keaton film *My Life*. However, this was followed three years later by the notable role as Cleo in *Set It Off* alongside Vivica A. Fox, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Kimberly Elise. While Latifah also contributed the song “Name Callin’” to the soundtrack, the real object of attention during that movie was the sexy and explicit scene between Cleo and her female lover, spurring inquiry regarding what was acting and what was natural. *Set It Off* brought in a Black Film Award for the Acapulco Film Festival in the category of Best Actress, as well as nominations for an Image Award and an Independent Spirit Award.

In 1997, Latifah had a small part in the movie *Hoodlum*, set in 1930s Harlem and starring Laurence Fishburne, Cicely Tyson, Tim Roth, Vanessa L. Williams, and Loretta Devine. Following *Living Single’s* run, she made a return to the movies. She didn’t quite hit the ground running with the poorly received *Sphere*, a science-fiction film based on the Michael Crichton novel, but she followed that up with the very different—and more nuanced—feature *Living Out Loud*, in which she played a jazz singer who befriends the lead characters played by Holly Hunter and Danny DeVito. Following *Living Out Loud*, for which she received positive reviews and an Image Award nomination, she reunited with Cicely Tyson in the television miniseries *Mama Flora’s Family*, based on Alex Haley’s novelized account of his mother’s life. In 1999, she teamed up with another black powerhouse in Denzel Washington, playing nurse to his paralyzed detective in the crime thriller *The Bone Collector*.

She had a far smaller role in *Bringing Out the Dead*, also in 1999, which coincided with yet another watershed moment—the launch of her daytime talk show, *The Queen Latifah Show*, which ran in syndication until 2001. Given her air of easy confidence, approachability, and humor, she was a natural choice to head a talk show, despite the fact that the market appeared to be glutted at that time with such shows. Also, 2001 was a busy year in general on the television front—she made appearances on *Spin City*, followed up the next year with a supporting role in the television drama *Living with the Dead*. A small part as herself in the Disney film *The Country Bears* was followed by an Image Award–nominated role as the best friend of Sanaa Lathan’s lead character Sidney in the hip hop love story *Brown Sugar*.

That same year, Latifah snagged what has thus far been one of her most significant roles: the part of the corrupt jailhouse warden in *Chicago*, the award-winning musical that generated Oscar, Golden Globe, and Screen Actors Guild nominations for Latifah in the category of Best Supporting Actress, as well as a BET award and a Black Reel Award. Other nominations came from the Teen Choice Awards, the MTV Movie Awards, and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards. The Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress ultimately went to Latifah’s costar, Catherine Zeta-Jones, but the nomination and Latifah’s performance provided confirmation of what some critics had been saying all along: Latifah was in Hollywood to stay, and she deserved her spot. It was perhaps only appropriate that this affirmation
should come in a musical, a form rarely embraced by present-day Hollywood and yet one that the audience seemed to welcome. *Chicago* was not without its critics, however; although Latifah was compelling in her role, the idea of the bawdy, dishonest, and manipulative Mama Morton was one that seemed to play on a number of stereotypes about black women, especially when Mama flaunted her natural assets in a sexy number.

*Bringing Down the House*, in which Latifah starred alongside Steve Martin while producing as well, attracted some of the same criticism. Playing a wrongly convicted inmate who ingratiates herself into Steve Martin’s life in order to secure his legal services, Latifah’s character alternately parodies every stereotype of poor black people in the United States and then demonstrates her ability to appear polished and sophisticated when required. This performance, which seemed to highlight both the character’s and Latifah’s chameleon-like qualities, snagged her an Image Award for Outstanding Actress in a Motion Picture. At the same time, however, while many viewers were pleased to see Latifah in such a high-profile role, others questioned her success in satirizing stereotypes rather than reinforcing them. As Allison Samuels noted in a *Newsweek* article, the theme of the black woman teaching an uptight white man to get in touch with his emotions—in part by grasping her breasts, at one point—is hardly new, and seemed to fit neatly into a genre of comedies that produce laughs by mining ethnic stereotypes. In the same article, however, acclaimed director John Singleton and rapper Snoop Dogg both agreed that work is so scarce for black actors that they cannot always afford to reject such subject matter. As a producer, however, Latifah seemed comfortable with the overall moral of *Bringing Down the House*, which she saw as a sly reminder that people are not always what they seem, a message reinforced rather absurdly in the satire *Scary Movie 3*, where Latifah had a small role. Certainly Latifah has not fit neatly into any category that might have been designated for her—unlike other rappers who have made a career out of appearing in stories about hip hop or urban life, she has managed to cover a vast spectrum of projects in her acting.

Rapping is never far from her heart, however, as demonstrated in *Barbershop 2: Back in Business*, where a typically tough Latifah character puts her rhyming skills up against the male competition in an impromptu battle of wills. Although it did not match the success of the original and Latifah’s role seemed peripheral at times, *Barbershop 2* was still enough of a crowd pleaser to snag a BET Comedy Award for Latifah. Following work on television projects such as *Eve* and *The Fairly OddParents*, Latifah turned her attention to writing, devising the story for *The Cookout* with friends Shakim Compere and Darryl “Latee” French. Latifah also acted as executive producer for that film and appeared in a supporting role, but those efforts proved mainly futile as *The Cookout* debuted to cool reviews. A lead appearance in *Taxi* opposite Jimmy Fallon proved no better, but Latifah’s star turn in *Beauty Shop*, the *Barbershop* spinoff, was a considerable improvement, earning her
nominations from the BET Comedy Awards, the Image Awards, and the Teen Choice Awards.

Demonstrating her versatility yet again, Latifah added a role as Auntie Em in *The Muppets’ Wizard of Oz*, followed by another leading role in *Last Holiday*, a remake of a 1950 Alec Guinness movie. The story of a shy woman who must cast aside her considerable inhibitions if she wants to enjoy what she believes are her final days, *Last Holiday* paired Latifah with another rap icon, LL Cool J.

With the same determination she has applied to her musical career, Latifah continues to build on her rich body of screen work, refusing to be stalled by the misses sprinkled among the hits. Latifah rarely surrenders to typecasting or the lure of the consistently ordinary. Her *Ice Age 2* work is joined by the film *Stranger Than Fiction*, a surreal comedy starring Will Ferrell. Thus Latifah’s film interests remain versatile, and she ensures that she has several avenues open for success. Continuing to demonstrate a good eye for strong talent, Latifah and Compere recently signed an agreement to comanager Oscar-nominated actor Terrence Howard through their Flavor Unit Entertainment agency. Even at a young age, Latifah seemed to recognize that she would need to develop the talent of others, rather than relying simply on the promise of her own career. Managing others and producing films have allowed her to expand the potential for success. At the same time, her attempts to be all things to all people can result in more mediocre movies than notably good ones. In general, she remains one of the most successful rappers to move into film, bearing in mind how difficult the transition has been for many of her peers. Although she has only made a handful of truly notable films, that still sets her apart, and has contributed to the fact that she is now viewed as an actress as much as a musician.

Interestingly, Latifah is also viewed, to a lesser extent, as a model, appearing in magazines and elsewhere as a spokesperson for Cover Girl. Latifah is not Cover Girl’s first musician-cum-actress-cum-model, or its first black spokesperson—Brandy and Tyra Banks have also modeled Cover Girl products. The real surprise lies in the fact that Latifah is not a typical model on a number of levels. In contrast to the days preceding her career, when her first sight of Salt-N-Pepa failed to inspire her because the rappers were more sexy than the down-to-earth Latifah, Queen Latifah is now frequently packaged as an elegant, well-dressed, meticulously made-up woman. The young rapper in cobbled-together Afrocentric ensembles or, alternately, casual athletic gear, appears to have been subsumed into a glossier version. That version, however, still does not conform to Hollywood standards of thinness or beauty, and Queen Latifah has been adamant in stating that she would never attempt to diet her way down to the kind of slimness embraced by many other women, including most of the African American women who succeed in hip hop or in acting. She advocates a healthy and active lifestyle, but reminds women that model-like body types cannot be realistically achieved by most.
Despite suggestions that she did undergo a breast reduction, Queen Latifah remains visibly heavier than her counterparts, which makes her contract as a Cover Girl model even more remarkable. Previous contracts have been awarded to those who do appear to fit into the Hollywood mold, such as the thin and light-skinned Halle Berry or the aforementioned Brandy. As with Latifah’s move away from rap and toward a smoother, more mainstream sound, it is difficult to know if this transformation also marks a departure from her determination to be accepted on her own terms, or a reaffirmation that she can be a role model for other women who do not quite fit the mold.

AT THE TOP OF HER GAME? MAPPING THE LATIFAH LEGACY

While she has certainly left behind many of her early trademarks—the short haircut, wearing the colors of the African National Congress, her queen’s crown, the military or sporty gear—it is difficult to say if this means Latifah has lost her political or social consciousness. When comparing the regal stance of the young woman on the cover of All Hail the Queen—head swathed, next to a black, red, and green symbol that evokes Africa—to the elegant, pinstripe-clad woman with silky straight hair on the cover of The Dana Owens Album, it is equally possible to speculate that this is a performer who has merely grown up and now presents a more mature face, or that Latifah has now entered more fully into a glossy corporate system that requires her to tone down any rough edges. Her recent hints that she might contemplate a political career suggest that she may be finding new ways to get across the social messages that she once delivered through forceful raps and in-your-face performances.

Although she seems to have left behind many of her early ambitions to rap about misogyny and self-respect in a way that would empower women and African Americans, she remains a trailblazer in other, unanticipated ways. The Latifah story is still being written—in 2006, she has shown no sign of slowing down, voicing a character in the animated sequel, Ice Age 2: The Meltdown and working on a 2007 film production of Hairspray. Her filmography continues to grow and she keeps her hand in the musical scene, reminding her fans of both her versatility and her tirelessness. Her own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame—the first ever awarded to a female hip hop artist—provides further confirmation of the distinctive nature of her accomplishments. While some of her fellow rappers—male and female—have wilted under the pressures of a merciless industry, Latifah has put together a model for success that lasts. She makes no apologies for her mistakes or for her apparent moves away from the rap world, and in fact, she may have no need to do so. Lorraine Ali, offering a generally favorable review of The Dana Owens Album, points out how great a shift Latifah has made away from the world of hip hop, noting that it’s unlikely that many of today’s rappers devote
much consideration to her current musical projects: “Too many years have passed and they know her as an icon and an actor, not as a rapper. That’s likely fine with Latifah. She is, after all, the Queen of Reinvention” (59).

As the Queen of Reinvention, Latifah has still managed to highlight music in her career, but the music she has performed most recently is softer, far less political, and arguably less original. The Princess of the Posse who once collaborated with Jungle Brothers, Naughty by Nature, and De La Soul went back on tour in 2005, this time with fellow Grammy winners Jill Scott and Erykah Badu. As the three main personalities behind the Sugar Water Festival, Latifah, Scott, and Badu have provided a showcase for black, mainly female vocalists that they hope will make an annual appearance for some time to come. Given Badu’s own status as a talented, creative singer who tackles political and social issues as she sees fit, as well as her moves in and around an Afrocentric aesthetic, it is certainly interesting to see Latifah collaborating with her at this stage of their careers. Badu’s musical sound and life story have been markedly different from Latifah’s, but it may be that artists such as Badu, not just rappers such as Missy Elliott, provide the best evidence that Latifah’s legacy is meaningful and yielding fruit for the future.

In the meantime, Latifah continues to sing, to act, to host awards shows, and to foster a kind of omnipresent image in various forms of media. It is difficult to evaluate whether she has managed to fulfill the definition of success she provided in 2002, before the string of movies that came to define her more as actor than rapper: Speaking to Rhonda Baraka and Gail Mitchell on the subject of women in rap, she explained her philosophy by saying that any “female rapper who comes with her own style, stays true to what she does, understands the work that’s involved and stays with the right people will be around 10 years from now. But you won’t be on top all the time. If you can accept that, you’ll be all right” (101). In rap terms, of course, it is impossible to see Latifah as currently on top, a position she seems to accept as she moves toward a softer, more mainstream sound. It does not seem to faze her successors either, many of whom are also working on building diversity into their own careers. The young hard-core rapper Trina, in the same article, commented on the inspiration provided by MC Lyte, Salt-N-Pepa, and Latifah as women who have been successful at different levels and in different settings, a success she has attempted to mimic through her own work in rap, film, and other forms of entrepreneurship (Baraka and Mitchell). Similarly, Eve, one of the most successful young rappers in recent times, has indicated that she thinks female up-and-comers must acknowledge and respect the dues paid by predecessors such as Lyte and Latifah.

The central paradox of Latifah’s career is one that can be seen with other rappers as well. Hailed as an icon, worshipped as hip hop royalty, imitated by her successors, Latifah’s status as a rapper is both unassailable and frozen in the past. She still has talent, and plenty of it, both dramatic and musical, but she has chosen to use her talents differently than she once did. If she has
inspired young women significantly, it seems to be primarily by showing them how to conduct themselves with confidence, to diversify in order to avoid a narrowly focused and unnecessarily short career, and to create strong and meaningful relationships with male and female colleagues alike. The result is a new generation of tough, savvy young female rappers, many of them concentrating on the potential for crossing over into mainstream celebrity. If they demonstrate self-sufficiency, perhaps Latifah’s example deserves some of the credit. At the same time, however, Latifah’s marketing legacy sometimes seems to overshadow her musical legacy. Her early hits will always be remembered for their frankness, their sincerity, and the impeccability of their timing, as Latifah’s pro-woman rhymes dropped into an industry where gender relations were so troubled. However, as Latifah has moved away from lyrics that promoted strength, honesty, and pride for both men and women, few successors have picked up the gauntlet. Hip hop is still a venue where too many women are marginalized, and the rapper who once spoke out against this with such passion now seems to have adopted a new coping strategy: walking away and onto other roads. Regardless of this fact, Latifah remains an iconic figure in the industry, one who helped mentor other young female rappers, to pave the way for hip hop’s entry into other fields, and one whose longevity, determination, and versatility still mark her as true hip hop royalty.

See also: Lil’ Kim, MC Lyte, Salt-N-Pepa, Roxanne Shanté, Native Tongues, Missy Elliott

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FURTHER RESOURCES


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FILMOGRAPHY

The Geto Boys

Jason D. Haugen

The Geto Boys would rather be hated for what we are than loved for what we are not.

Bushwick Bill

Emerging primarily from the West Coast in the mid to late 1980s, one of the most influential and oft-maligned movements of hip hop and rap music was what came to be known as hard-core or gangsta rap. Although originally associated with such California-based rappers as Ice-T and N.W.A., few would argue that not many artists took this genre to a level as extreme as the Geto Boys, the first major rap group to emerge from Houston, Texas. Considered among the hardest of the hard-core gangsta rappers, the Geto Boys attained iconic status through their intermingling of themes of acute mental psychosis with the standard gangsta images of urban street life,
where the violence concomitant with the hustling lifestyle is so vividly portrayed in the narratives penned by gangsta rappers (see sidebar: *Hustle and Flow*).

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**Hustle and Flow**  
*Jason D. Haugen*

Perhaps the most significant rap-related film to cross into the mainstream to date is 2005’s *Hustle and Flow*, an independently financed film written and directed by Craig Brewer. This film focuses on DJay, a down-and-out pimp and drug peddler played by Terrence Howard, who struggles to break free of his lowly life through creating rap music. Unlike many representations of the pimp persona that have appeared before, the character of DJay is not portrayed in a glamorous way. Rather, he is a conflicted man who hustles because he feels like he has to, on the one hand, but who also shows compassion toward the women for whom he feels a great deal of responsibility.

Facing a midlife crisis of personal and artistic identity, DJay views the upcoming return of an acquaintance-turned-rap superstar (Skinny Black, played by Ludacris) as his last chance to make it, if he can come up with some way not only to produce a worthy sample of original music to present, but also to get Skinny Black to actually listen to it.

The film highlights the obstacles DJay must face in pursuing his dream, from being too poor to afford adequate equipment to being too unknown for successful artists and radio stations to take him seriously. Along the way, we are given a glimpse into the darker side of Memphis street life, as we are exposed to DJay’s relationships with women, whom he both exploits and depends on: the pregnant Shug (Taraji P. Henson), the extremely negative Lexus (Paula Jai Parker), and Nola (Taryn Manning), the girl who has to turn tricks in order to finance DJay’s recordings. Also emphasized in the film is the collaborative nature of the process of producing rap songs, as DJay works on his lyrics and vocal delivery while his friends Key (Anthony Anderson) and Shelby (DJ Qualls) take on the technical tasks of actually coming up with the music and recording DJay’s songs.

*Hustle and Flow* features original rap songs written by local Memphis underground rapper Al Kapone, as well as the Three 6 Mafia. It was critically acclaimed and nominated for many awards, and won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival. Terrence Howard was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance of DJay, although that award was ultimately presented to Philip Seymour Hoffman for his portrayal of the title character in *Capote*. Three 6 Mafia became the first rap group to ever win an Academy Award for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures (Original Song) for “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp” and was also the first rap group to actually perform at the ceremony.
Being the godfathers of the Houston rap scene, the Geto Boys were not only the forerunners of the recent explosion of Texas hip hop, they were also the first major rap figures to emerge out of what would later be a dominating force in rap music and hip hop much more generally: the Dirty South or the Third Coast. Thus, the influence of the Geto Boys was huge not only to the local scene in Houston but also across the South, and their style would inspire many artists who would later rise out of scenes in New Orleans, Atlanta, Memphis, and elsewhere (see sidebar: The Memphis Rap Scene).

Of course, the fame of the Geto Boys was not limited to hip hop insiders. The invocation of their name still recalls their notoriety in American pop culture at large in their earlier days. The response to their eponymous breakthrough album in 1990 was one of such shock and dismay that not only did

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**The Memphis Rap Scene**

*Jason D. Haugen*

Memphis, Tennessee, is rightfully known as a historical hotbed of American music. Not only was it a major hub of early rock ‘n’ roll (spawning such legendary artists as Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins), but it was also an influential source of legends of country music (Johnny Cash), the blues (Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and B.B. King), soul (Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, and Booker T. and the MG’s), and funk (Isaac Hayes).

More recently, however, Memphis has served as home to a vibrant hip hop community, being one of the major centers of Southern rap. Although some artists like Eightball and MJG have been influential throughout the South since the early 1990s, the explosion of the Dirty South into national consciousness in the late 1990s brought various Memphis artists to national attention. Memphis rappers have been heavily influenced by the crunk movement, featured on the dance floors of clubs throughout the South.

Eightball and MJG, the first major rap artists to emerge from Memphis, formed Suave House Records in 1993, in order to distribute their own records and those of such other artists as Tela and Crime Boss. They are acknowledged as major early influences of the style of rap that would later be associated with the Dirty South and have maintained a successful career since those early days.

Of late, the best-known Memphis-based group is the Three 6 Mafia. They began life as the Triple 6 Mafia, a hard-core underground rap group; their name alludes to the biblical “Number of the Beast.” Over the years many lineup changes have occurred, but the stable members have been Juicy J and DJ Paul. Other members have included the rappers Crunchy Black, Koopsta Knicca, Lord Infamous, La’ Chat, and Juicy’s older brother, Project Pat. While garnering a large underground following over the years, the group eventually crossed into mainstream success with their Sony Records album *Most Known Unknown* in 2005. They will probably be best remembered as the first rap
the group’s major label (Geffen, who at that time was the distributor of Rick Rubin’s Def American label) refuse to distribute it, the original CD manufacturer refused even to print copies of it. Although the controversy over *The Geto Boys* occurred in the wake of the furor over the sexually explicit lyrics of the 2 Live Crew, the addition of the Geto Boys’ uniquely explicit brand of violence to the already turbulent brew of attitude, sex, and “foul” language inherent to rap music went way over the line for many. As Greg Baker pointed out, the popular perception of rap music at the dawn of the 1990s was that 2 Live Crew was “too nasty,” N.W.A. was “too dangerous,” and the Geto Boys were “too nasty and too dangerous” (60, emphasis mine).

In a genre that is intrinsically (and intentionally) controversial, the emergence of the Geto Boys as the most controversial of a lot that included such notable figures as N.W.A. (also including the solo work of Eazy-E, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre), Ice-T, and myriad others would itself make them icons for pushing the boundaries of what was deemed possible to express through music.

THE EARLY DAYS: FROM INAUSPICIOUS BEGINNINGS TO OVERNIGHT NOTORIETY

The story of the Geto Boys begins with the Ghetto Boys. The prescriptive English spelling of their name is not the only thing unrecognizable about the initial incarnation of the group of rap performers assembled by visionary Houston businessman James “Lil’ J” Smith, who set out to create, manage, and promote a rap group that would focus on issues that were relevant to his own friends and personal experience. Established in 1986, the original lineup of Ghetto Boys consisted of Prince Johnny C, the Slim Jukebox, DJ Ready Red, and, much more marginal in the earlier days than he would eventually grow to be, Bushwick Bill. They released their first album, *Making Trouble*, in 1988. This record met with little acclaim (and not much higher record sales), and has been dismissed as little more than a Run-DMC ripoff, with the Ghetto Boys utilizing the Run-DMC musical model of two MCs and an old-school mixing and scratching DJ, throwing in a dancing dwarf as their only truly novel contribution. The album cover alone shows not a small amount of stylistic homage to those New York City rap pioneers, with the
Ghetto Boys wearing black top hats and gold chains in the classic Run-DMC style. What is contained within the album itself has not been the subject of very much discussion in light of what would come shortly after.

When Prince Johnny C and the Slim Jukebox left the group to pursue other career paths, Lil’ J was forced to replace them. In stepped Mr. Scarface (originally billed as DJ Akshen, Brad Jordan) and Willie D (Willie James Dennis). Although different versions of the replacement story have been told, and different people have taken credit for the breakout success that was soon to follow, this new lineup (minus DJ Ready Red, who would depart the group after the second album) very quickly established itself as the classic lineup of Geto Boys. Who were these little-known rappers that would come together to create such a potent force as a group?

Bushwick Bill was born with the name Richard Shaw in Jamaica, although he was raised in the Flatbush district of Brooklyn. His induction into the music business was not as a rapper, but as a break dancer. He moved to Houston with his family in 1987 and joined up with the Rap-A-Lot crew as Little Billy, the dancer for the original incarnation of the Ghetto Boys. Willie D would eventually write some lyrics for Bushwick (including his eventual breakout song, “Size Ain’t Shit”) to see if he could rap, and when he proved that he could, he became a full-fledged member of the group. He would eventually develop his own smooth-flow style and become one of the more recognizable voices and characters in gangsta rap.

Scarface (Brad Jordan) grew up in the South Acres neighborhood in southern Houston. He seems to have had a relatively troubled childhood, with several trips to mental hospitals for what was regarded as unpredictable behavior, and it has been reported that he made a suicide attempt at age fourteen. He is also reputed to have spent some time dealing drugs on the streets of Houston. However, the young kid who would develop into a rap music legend had always had diverse musical tastes, and before becoming a rapper he played lead guitar and sang for a rock band in Houston. By the time he met up with Lil’ J and joined the Geto Boys, he had already recorded a single, “Big Time,” at age sixteen under the name DJ Akshen. He would eventually adopt the moniker (Mr.) Scarface after recording the song of the same title, which was based on the cocaine-dealing Cuban refugee mob boss character Tony Montana, played by Al Pacino in the 1983 film *Scarface*, which itself became a classic source of samples for many rap groups. It must be pointed out that the original Ghetto Boys might be considered the first rap group of many to utilize this particular cultural source for samples to use in their music—they had previously tapped it for the track “Balls and My Word” on *Making Trouble*. This film, with its focus on the violent lifestyle of an underworld gangster, naturally lends itself to appropriation by rap artists who want to perpetuate similar identities for themselves in the songs that they perform.

Of the three members of the classic lineup of Geto Boys, it was Willie D alone that had already established himself with a solo album (*Controversy*,
1989) before he joined the group. The reestablished Geto Boys recorded some of Willie D’s solo songs as a group (e.g., “Do It Like a G.O.,” “Bald Headed Hoes”), and it was Willie D who was given the credit for penning most of the tracks on their breakthrough album, *Grip It! On That Other Level*, including such classic Geto Boys songs as “Trigga Happy Nigga” and “Mind of a Lunatic.” From the get-go, Willie D was outspoken with an extremely hard edge. With DJ Ready Red behind the mixes, this new lineup respelled their name as the Geto Boys and recorded *Grip It! On That Other Level* in 1990. This original recording gained the positive attention of legendary music producer Rick Rubin, of the Def American music label, who was sufficiently impressed with the material to sign the band and then rerecord, reproduce, or simply repackage ten of the twelve songs from *Grip It!*, along with a few new songs, for the self-titled album *The Geto Boys*. It was still 1990, and this revised album brought the Geto Boys into the national spotlight, stirring up controversy before it was even released—indeed, before it was even printed. Because of the controversial nature of the lyrical content, Geffen refused to distribute *The Geto Boys*. The Def American label was able to work out a distribution deal with WEA (owned by Time Warner). By 1991, however, when the Geto Boys recorded their follow-up album, *We Can’t Be Stopped*, even WEA backed out and Def American had to move on to yet another distributor, Priority Records.

Although most of the lyrical material was identical to that which had already been produced by the local, independently owned Rap-A-Lot label (in the form of *Grip It! On That Other Level*), the controversy sparked by their attempts at getting national distribution with the major labels is what propelled the Geto Boys into the national spotlight. They would go on to record several more albums with various lineup changes (and others with the classic lineup back intact), but *The Geto Boys* and *We Can’t Be Stopped* in particular set the tone for the way that the Geto Boys would go down in history, and it was by means of the public perception created in these records that the iconic status of the Geto Boys was solidified for posterity.

**THE MAJOR THEMES OF THE GETO BOYS’ MUSIC**

What was the fuss all about?

The name Geto Boys has become synonymous with extreme gangsta rap, and the group has been accused of promoting everything from rape to murder, with cannibalism and necrophilia even rearing their heads in various songs (e.g., “Mind of a Lunatic,” “Chuckie”).

While some cynics have contended that the extreme approach of the Geto Boys was deliberately engineered to stir up controversy and record sales, the band themselves steadfastly maintained that they were simply painting portraits of the reality that they had experienced by means of the lyrics that they
chose to record in their songs. Although the songs and albums that they have recorded over the years include a good deal of topical diversity, there are several thematic threads that hold together the Geto Boys’ oeuvre.

At the heart of the Geto Boys’ songs are primarily tales of urban street life, and particularly of urban “gangsta” life. In some sense, the Geto Boys portray themselves as modern urban outlaws. As with most gangsta rap as a genre, the Geto Boys’ narratives emphasize drug dealing and other “gangstafied” images, and all of these tales require a certain level of authenticity to be taken seriously by the audience. One thing that is not in doubt is that these Geto Boys had the street credibility that is so necessary for performers within this particular genre. Before joining the group, Scarface is said to have dealt drugs in his youth, and Willie D had served prison time for an armed robbery. Mid-nineties Geto Boy Big Mike (Mike Barnett) later served a prison term after his gig with the group, and both Scarface and Bushwick Bill have sustained serious injuries during various scuffles outside the studio (and, no doubt, outside the law).

While participating in a genre that takes the gangsta lifestyle as its fundamental backdrop, the Geto Boys are especially noted for the extremity and explicitness of the violence and sex in their narratives. They have also often been regarded as particularly misogynistic in a genre already derided as intrinsically misogynistic.

Beyond the usual gangsta clichés, however, the narratives of the Geto Boys have often centered on the telling of “horror stories,” which were usually detailed fictional narratives involving rape, torture, and murder, but placed in the context of the rough inner-city environments with which the rappers themselves had been associated. Although the Geto Boys are not typically considered as overtly political as some other groups like Public Enemy or N.W.A., they certainly do deliver commentary on various political issues. It could be argued that any discussion of the inner-city reality portrayed in gangsta rap is inherently political, but some of the Geto Boys’ songs address even more macro-social issues.

Beyond taking gangsta rap “to the next level,” perhaps the most notable aspect of the thematic ground covered by the Geto Boys was overtly psychological in nature, the introspective lyrics of many of their songs covering everything from psychotic breakdown ("Mind Playing Tricks on Me") to suicidal tendencies (e.g., “I Just Wanna Die,” “Mind Playing Tricks on Me”). The suicidal impulse permeates a fair number of Geto Boys songs, which is remarkable considering that the Geto Boys were some of the foremost proponents of a genre that places so much emphasis on individual strength, and braggadocio, and swagger. All empirical evidence suggests that this was not just a gimmick. One example is Scarface’s suicide attempt as a teenager. However, the most (in)famous eruption of the suicide urge occurred in real life for Bushwick Bill, in a scene immortalized in the cover art for the album We Can’t Be Stopped. While it is not exactly clear what transpired that
night, most versions of the story involve a heavily intoxicated Bushwick coaxing his girlfriend to shoot him, possibly while threatening her infant son. The bullet wound in his face led to the loss of Bushwick’s right eye, and a photograph of Scarface and Willie D escorting him through the hospital appears on the album cover. This singular image also vaults the Geto Boys into a pantheon of artists that are associated with unforgettable images, one which transcends the narrow genre of hip hop or rap music, fitting into American pop iconography much more generally.

Since all of the themes mentioned above emerge from the rendition of lyrics in particular narrative contexts, it is helpful to consider in more detail some of the most notable specific songs that the Geto Boys produced that address each of these themes.

The Gangsta Lifestyle

One of the Geto Boys’ first songs to become known nationally was the 1989 single “Do It Like a G.O.,” which brought the gangsta ethos directly into the studio and almost instantiated what might have been the first label-on-label rivalries in rap music. Among other things, this song called out the heads of East Coast and West Coast music labels for ignoring black-owned independent labels like Rap-A-Lot. In this song, the Geto Boys called on other rap musicians to not “sell out” to the white-owned, corporate music industry, which they saw as being in the habit of ignoring raw, streetwise groups such as themselves. The song closes with a skit featuring a phone call supposedly from an executive representing a white corporate label dismissing smaller, independent and black-owned labels, saying that black businessmen would never be able to get themselves together in any significant way. Lil’ J asserts otherwise, and he assures the caller that he is willing to “go to war” if that is what is required.

Other songs give narrative recounts of what life is like in the ghetto and highlight what the Geto Boys (and many others like them) think they have to do in order to survive in such a hostile environment. In one particularly descriptive song, “Straight Gangstaism,” Big Mike details observing older gangstas from his neighborhood from when he was a small child. He talks about how he used to study and emulate their styles, and how he admired everything from their cars to their nicknames to the way they stood and wore their hats. He reports that he himself is maintaining the same lifestyle that he had marveled at as a boy, and that with the respect and admiration he has gained from others from maintaining this lifestyle he sees no reason to leave it behind. Thus he promises to always be “straight ‘g.’” In the next verse, the local cachet of the gangsta image is brought home even more strongly, when the narrator talks about how he used to emulate his own grandfather and how he himself is now only “doing shit like grandpa in every way.” Although it is acknowledged that this lifestyle might lead to prison, this is the environment
and lifestyle that is familiar, and it will not be abandoned. (That prison is framed as a possibility but not an inevitability is different from the even more pessimistic vision of fellow Houston rapper E.S.G., who, in one chorus, exhorts to his friends “in the grave” and “in the pen,” “I’ll see you when I get in”).

Like other gangsta rap artists before and after (e.g., N.W.A. and Ice-T), the Geto Boys also address the issue of perceived persecution by white law enforcement, particularly in the wake of the notorious video of the beating of Rodney King. “Crooked Officer” is a very direct indictment of law enforcement, particularly of “brainwashed” black police officers. In one verse, Bushwick states that he’s not “going out” like Rodney King but would instead grab his gun and come out blasting. They state in no uncertain terms that they and others like them have been persecuted for too long, and they express the desire to put the crooked officers into their coffins. According to their lyrics, the fear of the police permeates all age levels, as does the desire for reprisal. In “Straight Gangstaism,” Big Mike talks about playing “Cops and Robbers” when he was a child, when nobody wanted to play the part of the cops because doing so was guaranteed “to get yo’ ass kicked.”

One particularly poignant portrait of life in the ghetto is delivered in the song “Six Feet Deep,” which discusses the aftereffects of gang violence. Here the Geto Boys highlight the grief expressed by mothers who lose their sons and friends who lose their homeboys. They reflect on the senselessness of the death of their friends, how life is going to be without them, and also upon their own mortality and, specifically, their own vulnerability to inner-city violence, which subsequently leads to a need for them to carry their own weapons for self-defense. This tale of ghetto life and loss followed Ice Cube’s “Dead Homiez” but foreshadows such later songs as “The Crossroads,” Bone Thugs-N-Harmony’s eulogy for the late Eazy-E, and Puff Daddy’s “I’ll Be Missing You,” in memory of the Notorious B.I.G.

**Tales of Horror**

While many songs by the Geto Boys can be considered violent, the violence is usually portrayed in the context of stories of hard inner-city lives that are themselves often punctuated by sudden violence. Some of the group’s songs, however, forego the lessons learnable from those contexts and head straight for what may be regarded as pure horror stories, in the tradition of the classic slasher films well known from the cinematic genre.

A prototypical example is “Chuckie,” from the album *We Can’t Be Stopped*, which makes an obvious allusion to a film of this very nature—the first in a series of movies released under the name *Child’s Play*. In these films, a psychopathic (human) killer is able to transfer his soul into a red-headed talking doll named Chuckie. From his new soul-shell he begins a rampage, attempting especially to murder the child that had tried to befriend
the Chuckie doll. In the Geto Boys’ song, Bushwick Bill raps from the perspective of a psychotic child killer. He describes the murder and dismemberment of several victims, and he exhorts the audience, when they find the victims, to just tell the authorities that “Chuckie did it.” Bushwick brags that he would win any murder competition, and that for him murder comes very easily—it is nothing but “child’s play.” The song opens, closes, and is otherwise infused with audio samples of Chuckie from the movie (e.g., “Hi, I’m Chuckie. Wanna play?”), and other horror movies are alluded to throughout the narrative (e.g., *Friday the 13th* and *Night of the Living Dead*).

Bushwick’s invocation of Chuckie as a figure of horror to emulate in this particular song is notable for several reasons. First, the premise of the soul of a mass murderer haunting, much less controlling and going on a murder spree in the guise of, a child’s doll is so unbelievable that the character can almost only be interpreted as a figure of irony. Second, though, is the fact that Bushwick Bill, himself a dwarf, adopts the Chuckie persona as part of his own. He claims that “half [his] body is Chuckie, the other is Bushwick,” but what he clearly means is that he, Bushwick, in the context of the song, has Chuckie’s murderous nature within himself. The message is that dangerous people can come in all shapes and sizes, and that Bushwick should not be dismissed as innocuous just because of his small stature. Finally, with “Chuckie’s” murder and cannibalism of children juxtaposed with verbal images of Iraqi children being killed by U.S. bombs, it is implied that large institutional forms of violence (as engaged in by the U.S. military) just might be psychotic as well.

In some cases, the Geto Boys’ horror story narratives are overtly framed as simple instances of the exercise of free speech, made in order to point out that regardless of the extremity of the violence portrayed in these songs, equally (if not even more) violent things really do occur within our society, and not necessarily just in the inner-city ghetto. An example of such a framing device is used in another song that aims at telling a story of pure horror, from the album *Till Death Do Us Part*. “Murder Avenue” is claimed to have been “inspired by Jeffrey Dahmer.” In this song, Bushwick Bill raps about the rape and murder of a law student who had been casing him, and the subsequent terrorizing of a newlywed couple. Although purportedly a song inspired by a real-life murderer, some of the crucial details of the real-world events are erased in the narrative that Bushwick performs—specifically, that Jeffrey Dahmer was a torturer, rapist, and murderer of other men. Heterosexuality is so normative within gangsta rap that it is almost inconceivable that any artist would attempt to lyricize possibly homosexual inclinations, even in a fictional story about committing atrocities against their fellow men. The rape in this song is directed toward the female law student (“Rosie”) and newlywed bride (“Bridgett”), whereas the newlywed husband (“Ted”) is merely tortured and murdered. In a later song (“The Bushwicken”) from his solo album *Phantom of the Rapra*, Bushwick gives a further nod to the reality that
inspires some of the lyrics in his music, claiming that in comparison to himself, Dahmer was a “minor case.”

Psychological Breakdown

Some of the more extreme violence portrayed in the lyrics of the Geto Boys is intended to be taken much more seriously, however. In these cases, the presumed psychosis of the narrator is taken to be a natural outgrowth of the violence and chaos of the urban street life in which the narrator is (or has been) embedded. That is, the narrator is portrayed as reacting violently to a violent world over which he has no control.

A prototypical example of a song detailing the psychological breakdown of a narrator is “Mind of a Lunatic,” which probes the psyche of men driven insane by the ghetto. This song, with its grisly details, is probably the most often cited example of the extreme lyrics of the Geto Boys. In it, Bushwick Bill raps about his rape and murder of a woman he had observed through an open window, and the paranoia he experienced after the deed when he remains with her bloody body. Scarface details getting into gunfights with drug dealers and the police, with his own insanity being exacerbated by the smoking of “fry,” a marijuana joint laced with PCP. In a standoff with the police, Scarface begins to shoot innocent bystanders, but then he wakes up in a mental ward with slit wrists. Willie D warns the audience not to mess with him, because he is exceedingly dangerous and does not tolerate “bullshit”; he’ll stab you, blow up your house, and other nefarious doings.

Songs like “Mind of a Lunatic” are particularly effective because of the street cred of their performers; although we presume that these stories are intentionally designed to have dramatic effect, they are delivered in such a way that the audience might well believe that the real-world rappers have the capability to do some of the things they rap about. As an example, Willie D overtly blurs the line between fantasy and reality, stating that what he is saying “is fact, not fiction.” Fantasy also intrudes upon reality when the narrators, in the course of committing their crimes, invoke violent figures from popular culture (such as Jason, the hockey mask–wearing killer from the Friday the 13th movies, and Freddy Kruger, the killer who murders teens in their dreams in the Nightmare on Elm Street films). It is left to the audience to discern what is real and what is not, since we cannot trust the narrators themselves, they claim to have gone insane.

The narrators also claim that society should be blamed for the ills perpetrated by the characters in “Mind of a Lunatic,” not only for causing their psychoses but also for allowing them to roam the streets. Bushwick raps that he ought to be bound by a straitjacket, and Willie D says that he should have been killed as a child before he had the opportunity to wreak havoc on society.

Paranoia, homicidal thoughts, and other forms of psychosis are also dealt with in one of the Geto Boys’ biggest hits, “Mind Playing Tricks on Me.”
Although these same issues are addressed in “Mind of a Lunatic,” the former song is much less explicit than the latter. As a result, “Mind Playing Tricks” was actually able to be played on commercial radio, and it was, frequently, when it was released. Scarface describes paranoia and suicidal fantasies but relates that he cannot kill himself and leave his child an orphan. Willie D expresses the feeling of being well-known in the ’hood and feeling constant fear of being stalked by the people that he himself had victimized in the past. Bushwick delivers a particularly memorable tale of getting into a fight with the father of a child whose Halloween candy he and his friends had stolen, and then coming to the realization that not only is it not Halloween, but his friends are not with him, and he has not been beating a man but bashing his fists onto the concrete sidewalk.

World Politics

In some cases, the Geto Boys address geopolitical issues. The song “Fuck a War” features a very explicitly negative reaction to the dispatch of troops to repel Saddam Hussein’s army from Kuwait in the First Gulf War, with Bushwick arguing that it would be better to simply nuke Iraq than send in “niggaz on the front line.” Similarly, the politics of the ghetto are extended to the national level in “Damn It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta,” in which the first George Bush, the president of the United States at the time, is portrayed as just another gang-banging hustler who only happens to be white and in possession of much more clout than the ghetto-bound gangstas featured in most gangsta rap music lyrics. “The World Is a Ghetto” discusses the similarities of U.S. inner-city urban environments like Houston’s Fifth Ward to well-known hostile locales like Rwanda and discusses how poor (and especially black) people are neglected all across the world.

The Geto Boys engaged in larger political discourses outside the studio as well, with Bushwick Bill stirring up controversy for his use of the terms bitch and ho at a meeting of the National Association of Black Journalists in 1993. Scarface was among a variety of Rap-A-Lot rappers who recorded a song to benefit Texas death row inmate (and ultimately, executee) Gary Graham in 1993. Willie D’s lyrics were almost always political, and in his later incarnation as a syndicated talk show host he addressed many issues relevant to urban and black America.

Sexual Politics

Like many rap groups that have been called gangsta, the Geto Boys, especially early in their career, produced songs about sexual relations, utilizing the well-known categories assigned to women in this genre (i.e., “bitches,” “hos,” etc.). Released in 1990, in the wake of N.W.A.’s song “A Bitch Is a Bitch” (1989), the Geto Boys’ “Let a Ho Be a Ho” did not break any new lyrical
ground. Even so, the issue of sexual politics from the gangsta perspective is addressed in such songs as “Gangsta of Love,” “Bald-Headed Ho’s,” “Let a Ho Be a Ho,” and “This Dick Is for You.”

Other Themes

Of course, not all of the songs recorded by the Geto Boys can be topically compartmentalized, and many of their works crosscut the categories that have been proposed here. Among other notable topics covered by the Geto Boys’ lyrics, “Cereal Killer” (from Till Death Do Us Part) is a satiric comedy, wherein Scarface raps about a crime spree involving various characters from the world of children’s sugary breakfast cereals. His partner in crime is “Captain Crunch”; he murders a victim named “Fruity Pebbles,” is chased down by a police officer named “Franken Berry,” and so on. “The Unseen,” from Uncut Dope, is an antiabortion song. “Bring It On” (from Till Death Do Us Part) is a tour de force mélange of the Geto Boys and various guest rappers (including the 5th Ward Boys) engaging in an old-school rap-off, testing their skills on the mic as they talk about their skills outside the studio.

THE LATER YEARS AND THE SOLO CAREERS

Perhaps not surprising for a group cobbled together as a business venture by an enterprising young rap mogul, the Geto Boys were never the best of friends outside the studio. In later years, they would always express respect for each other as individuals, while maintaining that their relationship as a group was for business only. Perhaps it is also not surprising that this perspective was conducive to a certain fluidity of group membership. Several lineup changes occurred over the years and, since this has been the case even from the very beginning, it might be said that fluidity is in fact the norm for the group, even though what has been called the classic lineup is still the prototypical arrangement of Geto Boys.

DJ Ready Red left after The Geto Boys was released in 1990, and Willie D would leave after the group released We Can’t Be Stopped in 1991. For the recording of Till Death Do Us Part in 1993, Big Mike was added to the lineup, but he was gone when Willie D returned for a reunion with Scarface and Bushwick Bill on 1996’s The Resurrection. For their next album, Da Good Da Bad & Da Ugly in 1998, Bushwick Bill was gone, replaced by the rapper DMG. In 1998, Bushwick Bill sued Rap-A-Lot Records for $20 million, for an alleged assault that occurred outside a comedy club, which he claimed had involved Rap-A-Lot employees attacking him for trying to break out of a recording contract. However, by 2005 all seemed to be forgiven, as Bushwick returned for yet another reunion with Scarface and Willie D, The Foundation, in 2005, and for War and Peace in 2006.
The later Geto Boys albums have met with relatively positive reviews and decent album sales, although their later work is generally regarded as only maintaining the legendary status that the group had already acquired. To date, two greatest hits compilations have been released. *Uncut Dope* was released in 1992, containing tracks from the first four albums (and mostly from *The Geto Boys* and *We Can’t Be Stopped*), along with some otherwise unreleased material like “The Unseen” and “Damn It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta.” A later package, *Greatest Hits*, released in 2002, includes tracks from those four albums plus songs from the later 1990s albums: *Till Death Do Us Part, The Resurrection*, and *Da Good DaBad & Da Ugly*. The later package includes a bonus DVD featuring Geto Boys videos and live performances from the entire period covered by the collection.

Throughout the grand run of the Geto Boys, each of the members has worked on various side projects, and each has released various solo albums over the years. However, only Scarface has sustained a level of success as a solo artist that rivals (and possibly even exceeds) that of the Geto Boys as a collective entity.

**Scarface**

On October 26, 1991, the leading magazine observing the business side of the entertainment industry, *Billboard*, initiated a new category to track the success (measured in terms of album sales) of new musical artists. Unlike the other categories monitored by *Billboard*, the Heatseekers chart was designed to be open only to artists who had never broken into the top half of album sales for any given week (i.e., artists who have not appeared in the Top 100 on the *Billboard* Top 200 list). The number one album on that inaugural list was Scarface’s first solo album, *Mr. Scarface Is Back*. While it might at first seem odd for a debut album to include the notion of returning, Scarface was already somewhat known from his work with the Geto Boys; in fact, on the album cover he is billed as “Scarface of the Geto Boys.” This album graduated from the Heatseekers list (and into the *Billboard* Top 100) by the next week, having received critical accolades to go along with its commercial success. It would ultimately rise to number fifty-one on the *Billboard* Top 200 and number thirteen on the R&B/Hip-Hop list.

Lyrically, *Mr. Scarface Is Back* continued with the themes previously covered by the Geto Boys on their albums *The Geto Boys* and *We Can’t Be Stopped*, but Scarface’s performances were so well done that this solo effort quickly began to establish him as the standout performer of the group. This initial impression would be borne out by the later success of his solo albums, as compared to the solo output of Bushwick Bill and Willie D. Among the narrative-driven songs on *Mr. Scarface Is Back* were ones that dealt with the life of a drug dealer (“Mr. Scarface”); life in the urban jungle (“Money and the Power”); sexual politics (“The Pimp”); and mental psychosis brought on
by the urban jungle (“Murder by Reason of Insanity” and “Mind of a Lunatic”).

In 1993 Scarface released his second solo album, *The World Is Yours* (1993), which has been interpreted as a slight change of direction for him. On the song “Now I Feel Ya,” Scarface expanded his thematic ground to cover the personal maturation that he had to undergo once he was able to see his own child growing up, and in trying to provide a better lifestyle for himself and his child Scarface draws a parallel between himself and the mother and grandmother who had raised him. It is only at this life stage that Scarface acknowledges understanding where they had been coming from when he was a troubled youth; as he states in the song’s refrain, addressing his mother and grandmother, “Now I feel ya.” Additionally, unlike his previous album (and much other music in hip hop up to that time), new legal issues prevented the indiscriminate sampling that had been such a focus of this genre in the past. Commercially *The World Is Yours* did better than *Mr. Scarface Is Back* and all previous Geto Boys efforts, rising to number one on the *Billboard* Top R&B/Hip-Hop albums chart. (That same year, *Till Death Do Us Part* would be the first Geto Boys record to reach that same level.)

Scarface’s commercial success would only improve, as *The Diary* (1994) would reach number two on both the R&B/Hip-Hop and Top 200 lists. This album featured songs about murder (“The White Sheet”), death (“I Seen a Man Die”), vigilante justice (“No Tears”), gangstas defending their territory from rivals (“G’s”), braggadocio over sexual prowess (“Goin’ Down”), and a solo reworking of a Geto Boys classic (“Mind Playin’ Tricks 94”), among others.

In 1997, Scarface’s next album, *The Untouchable*, went all the way to number one on both *Billboard* lists. Although several Geto Boys and Scarface solo records would eventually be at the top of the *Billboard* R&B/Hip-Hop chart, to date *The Untouchable* is the only Geto Boys–related album to also reach the number one spot on the Top 200, which covers all musical genres. In 1998, Scarface released the double-length album *My Homies*, and in 2000 he released *Last of a Dying Breed*. Both of these albums would reach the Top 10 of both *Billboard* lists, giving Scarface a much better run of album sales than the other Geto Boys have been able to attain (either as a group or individually). To add to this commercial success, one of Scarface’s biggest critical achievements was winning Lyricist of the Year honors from *The Source* magazine at the 2001 Source Awards for his work on *Last of a Dying Breed*.

Although at this point it is impossible to tell what may be in store for Scarface’s future, one important milestone in any artist’s career is the release of a worthy compendium chronicling their output up to that date. Scarface’s collection *Greatest Hits* appeared in 2002, the same year that also saw the release of the Geto Boys’ *Greatest Hits*. Scarface’s collection included memorable tracks from all of his solo albums up to that time. However, this
collection could hardly be said to have been a career-capper, as he almost immediately released another album, *The Fix*, in 2002, and has been actively recording ever since, subsequently releasing the further albums *Balls and My Word* (2003); *Scarface Presents the Product: One Hunid* (2006); and *My Homies Part 2* (2006). In addition, at this writing Rap-A-Lot Records has announced the imminent release of a collaborative album from Scarface and the late Tupac Shakur, *2-Face*.

Besides the commercial success evidenced by the numerical measurement of album sales and relative position on charts like the *Billboard* R&B/Hip-Hop and Top 200, one important sign of Scarface’s major influence on hip hop and rap can be gauged by the number of important artists who have wanted to collaborate with him. The many artists who have recorded songs with Scarface over the years include Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, and Too $hort (“Game Over”); 2Pac and Johnny P. (“Smile”); Master P (“Homies and Thugz”); Too $hort, Devin “The Dude,” and Tela (“F*** Faces”); Jay-Z and Beanie Sigel (“Guess Who’s Back”); Nas (“In Between Us”); Faith Evans (“Someday”); the Game (“Never Snitch”); Mos Def and Common (“The Corner”); and also various Geto Boys such as Bushwick Bill (“Do What You Do”) and Willie D (“The Geto”). Some of these and many other collaborations are featured especially on the albums *My Homies* and *My Homies Part 2* (as well as on *Greatest Hits*).

Beyond his success as a rapper, Scarface has also been a successful producer, producing not only various material of his own but also that of others. In 2002 he was named the president of Def Jam South, where he has been credited with the original major-label signing of Ludacris, who would turn out to be one of the Dirty South’s most successful rappers. More recently, Scarface has formed a new company, the Underground Railroad Movement, and under a partnership with KOCH Records released *Scarface Presents the Product: One Hunid* in 2006. This record represents Scarface’s effort to present and promote a new group of up-and-coming rappers to the world, rapping alongside Scarface himself. The Product features the vocal talents of Will Hen (from San Francisco) and Young Malice (from Jackson, Mississippi), in addition to Scarface.

In many ways, this new effort is a return to Scarface’s roots with the Geto Boys, in that a rap mogul has formed a group to be promoted by his own independent record label. In this case, however, the man at the helm is one of the most respected rappers in the world. We will have to wait to see how successful (critically, commercially, and influentially) the Product will ultimately be; regardless, its appearance is yet one more footprint made by Scarface, who will always be remembered for originally establishing himself in his work with the Geto Boys.

*Bushwick Bill*

Although he originally wrote little of his own material with the Geto Boys, Bushwick Bill’s stature has always allowed him to stand out in a crowd, and
he has developed into a respected rapper with his own style, a flair for the outrageous, and a dark sense of humor. With such a strong personality, most people either love him or hate him. His first solo album, *Little Big Man*, met relatively positive reviews when it was released in 1992.

Perhaps the most well-known song on *Little Big Man* is “Ever So Clear,” the title of which makes a pun on the high-alcohol grain liquor Everclear, which he was supposedly drinking on the night that is immortalized on the cover of the Geto Boys album *We Can’t Be Stopped*. It was on that night that he got into a fight with his girlfriend, threatened her baby, and tried to coax her into shooting him after changing his mind about shooting her (according to the account told in this song). Bushwick details the pain, both physical and emotional, of being shot in the face and losing his eye, and he concludes that it was “fucked up” that he “had to lose an eye to see shit clearly.” Another song on that album, “Letter from the KKK,” implores “gangbangers” to abandon the violent gang life, since the inner city of that day was killing off the next generation of young black men, and that this was actually doing the work that white supremacists like the Ku Klux Klan would like to have been doing themselves. In “Chuckwick,” Bushwick reprises his “half-Chuckie/half-Bushwick” role, for another round of lyrical killing.

According to one interview with the man himself, it was watching a *Ducktales* cartoon with his children that inspired Bushwick’s mix of rap with opera on his next solo album, *Phantom of the Rapra*, in 1995. (It is not clear whence he adopted his new, short-lived pseudonym: Dr. Wolfgang von Bushwickin the Barbarian Mother Funky Stay High Dollar Bilstir). This album would be Bushwick’s most commercially successful, rising to number three on the *Billboard* Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums Chart, and number forty-three on the overall *Billboard* Top 200. Bushwick Bill’s later solo albums include *No Surrender . . . No Retreat* (1998), *Universal Small Souljah* (2001), and *Gutta Mixx* (2005), all of which have had their fans and detractors.

**Willie D**

In an interesting twist of fate, Willie D may have started out as the strongest songwriter of the classic lineup of Geto Boys, but he has probably had the least successful solo career. This would not have been obvious to an outside observer in 1989, however, when he released his first album *Controversy*, thus becoming the only Geto (or Ghetto) Boy to record his own album before he joined the group. *Controversy* contained several songs that would later be recorded by the Geto Boys.

Willie D left the group, purportedly because of financial disagreements with Rap-A-Lot, for his second solo effort, which followed on the heels of his success with the Geto Boys with the albums *Grip It! On That Other Level* and *We Can’t Be Stopped. I’m Goin’ Out Lika Soldier* appeared in 1992, and was a *Billboard* number one Heatseeker for one week before peaking at
number eighty-eight on the Top 200. This album was especially notable for its infamous song “Fuck Rodney King,” in which Willie D calls Rodney King a “sellout” and an “Uncle Tom” for pleading for peace during the posttrial LA riots. At this time, Willie D also publicly called fellow rapper Eazy-E a sellout for supporting one of the four police officers on trial for beating Rodney King. Willie D’s later albums, all of which have received mixed reviews and marginal attention, include Play Witcha Mama (1994), Loved by Few, Hated by Many (2000), Relentless (2001), and Unbreakable (2003).

Ironically, it is Willie D’s other careers after the Geto Boys that make him stand out from the group, including a brief stint as a politically oriented syndicated radio talk show host, an amateur boxer, and the operator of a real estate business based in Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Willie D will not be forgotten as a rapper and a songwriter, and he will always be recognized as the man whose bold lyrical invention propelled the Geto Boys into the limelight in their early days.

THE LEGACY OF THE GETO BOYS

The status of the Geto Boys as hip hop icons can be demonstrated by an examination of their legacy, within hip hop and rap music specifically, but also within popular culture more generally. With respect to their influence on other rappers, the Geto Boys showed early on that gangsta rap was a viable genre of music that could be applied outside of the already well-worn territories covered by LA-based groups. Like other gangsta rappers, the Geto Boys were able to infuse street credibility into their performances, and the subjects that they discussed were relevant to and caught on with urban audiences across the South and across the nation. In addition, the Geto Boys were also major innovators of the laid-back vocal performance that would come to be associated with the “Southern style,” the Dirty South flow, and eventually Houston’s Screwed and Chopped style (see sidebar: Sippin’ on Some Syrup). Moreover, the extensive use of humor that permeated their music illustrated

“Sippin’ on Some Syrup”
Jason D. Haugen

“Sippin’ on Some Syrup” was recorded by Three 6 Mafia (featuring UGK), for their 2000 album When the Smoke Clears. The title of the song refers to the practice of drinking large doses of codeine-based prescription cough syrups, specifically Promethazine. The syrup is mixed with soda or fruit juice and Jolly Rancher candy. In lyrics, syrup is also called “drank,” “purple drank,” or “purple stuff,” which references a series of television commercials for the fruit drink Sunny Delight. In the commercial, a group of thirsty kids searches through the refrigerator, bypassing soda, orange juice, and “purple stuff” for
that, although the subject matter was often very serious, it could also be treated in clever and witty ways.

In terms of the business aspect of rap and hip hop, Rap-A-Lot Records was one of the first independent music labels to make it big in the rap industry, and the Geto Boys were the featured artists associated with that label. Other artists to release records with Rap-A-Lot include, in addition to the various solo efforts of individual Geto Boys themselves, the 5th Ward Boys, Gangsta NIP, the Convicts, 2 Low, Do or Die, 3-2, Facemob, and Bun B. The success of Lil’ J’s Rap-A-Lot label allowed Houston to become one of the first major rap music scenes to emerge outside of New York or LA, and in turn led to the breakout of other major music scenes across the South (see sidebar: The Houston Rap Scene).

With respect to American culture at large, the Geto Boys were able to gain widespread notoriety through a popular acknowledgment that they were among the “hardest” of the hard-core gangsta rappers. The fact that they have been regarded as a bit too extreme may have led to the reality that they have not been able to maintain a consistent level of popular commercial success. Many of their songs have been assumed to be created merely to shock the audience; the controversies over the distribution and printing of their albums in the early years indicate that many people were in fact shocked by their music. The Geto Boys have been singled out and publicly criticized from various angles and from different sectors of American political life, from Republican Party presidential hopeful and Senator Bob Dole and William Bennett to C. Delores Tucker, the head of National Political Congress of Black Women.

Sunny D. In Three 6 Mafia’s “Swervin’,” the chorus from guest vocalist Mike Jones references drinking purple stuff.

The soporific effects of syrup change or enhance the experience of listening to music, and inspired the chopped and screwed method of production pioneered by Houston’s DJ Screw. Chopped and screwed radically slows the backbeats and vocals of rap recordings to create a thick, sluggish sound. DJ Screw and other producers inspired by his style have created alternate chopped and screwed versions of full-length albums from major rap artists.

Drug use has been flaunted in rap music by such artists as Cypress Hill, Redman, Method Man, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Snoop Dogg, and Dr. Dre, whose extremely popular album The Chronic was named for a potent strain of Southern California marijuana. While marijuana has long been ubiquitous to many countercultural groups, getting high on codeine-based cough syrups has become specifically and uniquely identified with rap music, and in particular with artists from the Dirty South, such as DJ Screw and various others in the Screwed Up Click (from Houston) and Three 6 Mafia (from Memphis). DJ Screw died at the age of thirty in his recording studio, after suffering a heart attack that a Houston medical examiner attributed to an overdose of codeine.
The Houston Rap Scene
Jason D. Haugen

Until the breakout year of 2005, in which various artists from the Swishahouse record label (especially Mike Jones, Paul Wall, and Slim Thug) put “H-Town” on the map in a major way, the Houston rap scene had been thought of as a hotbed for promising but, financially speaking, ultimately disappointing talent.

With the exception of the solo career of Scarface, most Houston rappers could never quite make it onto the national stage for any sustained period of time. The Geto Boys, while well-respected among those in the know (including critics and other performers), perhaps pushed the envelope a bit too far for more mainstream tastes, and never hit it big at the national level. Some near-misses were derailed through offstage criminal doings (local rappers Fat Pat and Big Hawk were murdered, and the South Park Mexican was sentenced to forty-five years in prison for aggravated sexual assault on a nine-year-old girl), but most Houston rappers simply failed to catch any prolonged attention at the national level. However, in the wake of what success the Geto Boys did have, a number of well-received rap artists emerged from this city, including UGK (The Underground Kingz, composed of Bun B and Pimp C) and artists associated with DJ Screw.

Perhaps the most lasting single impact on the music industry is the legacy of DJ Screw’s radically slowed down (“screwed”) style of production. Influenced by the soporific effects of codeine-based cough syrups, DJ Screw single-handedly created a musical revolution that was wildly popular on the Houston underground scene from the early 1990s through the breakout success of Swishahouse in 2005. Although DJ Screw died in 2000 from a heart attack caused by an overdose of codeine, this tradition lives on through the work of many artists, including especially members of the Screwed Up Click from the early 1990s on, including E.S.G., Lil’ Keke, Big Pokey, and Lil’ Flip. Screw’s signature method has been adopted by many artists from Houston and beyond, and remains the most notable contribution to the hip hop world developed in the Houston rap scene.

In terms of mainstream exposure, while many people have heard about the Geto Boys and their controversial lyrics, a lot of them have never actually heard or given serious consideration to the Geto Boys’ music. One mainstream introduction to the group was provided by Mike Judge in his 1999 film Office Space, which utilized several songs of the Geto Boys in different contexts, albeit as an overt parody. Most notably, an extended scene highlights the song “Damn It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta.” The main characters, portrayed as stereotypical white-collar types who are trying to break out of the corporate world, “get into some gangsta shit” with some office supplies,
and in a “gangbang”-type effort involving a baseball bat they take out a hapless Fax machine, all while the Geto Boys play in the background.

An additional legacy of the Geto Boys is their secure place within American music generally. Songs that invoke murder are hardly unique to the Geto Boys or even to gangsta rap. Indeed, there is a long tradition of songs about murder in American popular music. In what was at the time the definitive collection of Johnny Cash’s music, one of the three albums of his greatest hits collection covered the theme of murder (i.e., the album *Murder* appeared alongside the companion collections illustrating the two other great themes of Johnny Cash’s music: *Love* and *God*). Motivations given for murder have varied widely within the canon, from Frankie murdering Albert because she caught him with another woman (in “Frankie and Albert”) to the same crime being committed by Stagger Lee upon Billy Lyons, for whom it was all about the theft of the former’s John B. Stetson hat. In one of his several classic contributions to this tradition, Johnny Cash’s narrator in “Folsom Prison Blues” shoots a man in Reno, “just to watch him die.”

What sets gangsta rap apart from the classical treatment of murder in American popular music is the fact that the narratives of gangsta rap are usually framed from the first-person point of view, and that the performers are African American and based in an urban context. Rap music performers who invoke murder, rape, drug dealing, and other crimes must adopt a position in their performance that alludes to some level of authenticity (street credibility) in the subjects of their raps. At the same time, the narratives (and the narrators) insist that the things being rapped about are true. This focus on authenticity is only enhanced by the real-world experiences of the artists, many of whom actually have been involved in the street lifestyle. Of course, this level of credibility is also not unique to gangsta rap or gangsta rappers. It is well known that country music legend Merle Haggard served time in San Quentin prison, supposedly even being in the audience when Johnny Cash performed there. Even earlier, Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter) served a couple different terms in prison (once for homicide, and a second time for attempted homicide), and he was (probably apocryphally) reputed to have won his pardon from a governor by the pleasing sounds of his musical performance.

In any event, murder and redemption are themes that permeate not only American music but also film (e.g., Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*, etc.) and literature (e.g., Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, etc.), and has even been the focus of a Broadway musical (Stephen Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*).

Tracing such themes as sin and redemption through the course of American popular song, and art much more generally, would be an interesting exercise but lies far beyond our discussion here. It should be sufficient to state that gangsta rap artists have not generally expended much lyrical energy on the
redemption part, although Bushwick Bill does make a reference to changing his ways and “living for the Lord” in “Damn It Feels Good to Be a Gangsta.”

THE FUTURE

As of this writing, Lil’ J has changed his name to J. Prince, but he still owns and operates Rap-A-Lot Records, and he still owns the Geto Boys as a franchise. The classic lineup (Scarface, Bushwick Bill, and Willie D) have been more active as a group recently than at any time since their initial congregation, having released two albums. They also each pursue their own individual business interests and seem to be going strong.

For all of its massive popularity, hip hop and rap music can be a fickle game: New rappers come, strike it big overnight, and then disappear the next day, and this cycle repeats itself with a great deal of frequency. Regardless of what may happen down the road, the Geto Boys have solidified their place in rap music history and will always remain true icons of hip hop.

See also: Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Outkast

FURTHER RESOURCES


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Screwed and/or chopped versions exist for the last six titles.
The Native Tongues are a collective of hip hop artists who emerged out of the burgeoning underground alternative rap scene in New York City in the late eighties and early nineties. The collective was pioneered by Afrika Bambaataa in the late seventies and early eighties, with Queen Latifah and the Jungle Brothers being the initial members. It expanded to incorporate De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Chi Ali, and Black Sheep. A number of other artists, namely Common Sense (now Common), the Leaders of the New School, and Brand Nubian were also peripherally associated with the collective.

The groups in the Native Tongues collective distinguished themselves from other rap artists of their day in three ways: their use of conscious, positive, uplifting rap, their allegiance to Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation and the cosmic Afrocentric philosophy it advocated, and finally their sound, which relied on sampling widely and often from obscure jazz, blues, soul, gospel, folk, reggae, and rock records (see sidebar: R&B). Although the Native Tongues’ heyday ended in the mid-1990s, many of the artists continue to record, although now less in connection with each other. They are a unique group of
artists whose presence continues to be felt whenever an MC rhymes about something other than guns, diamonds, and the size of his rims. The Native Tongues style lives on in tracks where the sample isn’t an instantly recognizable tune from a fifteen-year-old hit single. Native Tongues music has a playful and enlightening message that can still be heard in such artists as Lauryn Hill, Mos Def, Kanye West, Talib Kweli, POS, and K-OS among others.

R&B
Aine McGlynn

R&B covers a wide range of musical styles. The term *rhythm and blues* dates back to the late 1940s and refers to the sound that developed as the deep rural southern Memphis blues of such artists as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf met an urbanizing black population. By the fifties it was already difficult to pin down what R&B referred to. It seemed to encompass soul, blues, doo wop, and jazz to some extent. By the 1990s, however, R&B was associated with superficiality, sentimentality, and overwrought romantic posturing. Several Native Tongues tracks feature disparaging comments about R&B singers. They are accused on *Black Star*’s “Thieves in the Night” of being devoid of any thought-provoking qualities whatsoever, while on A Tribe Called Quest’s “Buggin’ Out” Q-Tip rhymes about R&B trying to hone in on rap styling. Their critiques were for the most part well founded, as the early to mid nineties witnessed the success of acts such as Boyz II Men, Dru Hill, and Jodeci. These groups harmonized the fever-pitched strains of unfaithfulness, the pain of losing their women, and the hardships that go along with being a lover of ladies. The videos featured soft-focus lenses, yards and yards of billowing silk, and candlesticks in every corner of the ubiquitous bedroom. The critique of the R&B singer was multifaceted: The aesthetic was cheesy, the sound was a noxious and whiny neo-jazz, and the content was vapid.

The tune changed, though, later in De La and Tribe’s careers as they began to incorporate R&B on such tracks as “Stressed Out” and “All Good.” Initially they treated R&B with some tongue-in-cheek irony. For instance, De La Soul’s “Baby, Baby, Baby, Baby, Ooh Baby” walks a fine line between parodying R&B and participating in the genre. By the end of the 1990s, R&B artists were working with more classically hip hop-oriented producers, which resulted in a sound that teetered between the two genres. The silk sheets had been folded up and put away, the candles were blown out, and R&B singers like R Kelly and Bobby Brown began to posture in a way that was more reminiscent of Snoop Dogg than Luther Vandross. Perhaps it was because the quality of production changed toward the end of the decade, or perhaps because De La and Tribe were trying to stay relevant and current by incorporating R&B sounds into their recordings; whatever the reason, such R&B staples as Faith Evans and Chaka Khan made their way onto albums by the Native Tongues artists who had so criticized R&B in the early 1990s.
These artists are carrying a complex philosophy into the future of a genre whose mutated materialism takes it further and further away from its roots. The original Native Tongues cultivated a place for themselves on the margins of mainstream hip hop, where they cranked up the bass, turned up the Coltrane, and provoked an alternative sound. From hip hop’s cradle in New York City, the collective wrote for themselves and for their community, a story of uplift through solidarity and positive thinking.

THE CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIVE TONGUES

There was little to be positive about in the South Bronx in the early 1970s. The effects of deindustrialization and a crippling post-Vietnam recession were most deeply felt by the poorest members of New York City’s population. The overpopulated, dilapidated slums of the Bronx River housing projects, the hallways and streets around Monroe High School, the subways flying by Prospect Ave., all sighed under the growing weight of hopelessness and despair. The unemployment rate had never been higher; drugs were never so cheap or easy to get. New York City was characterized by an ineffectual police force, an inadequate infrastructure, and a corrupt bureaucracy that didn’t give a damn about its most vulnerable members (see sidebar: New York City: The Sixth Element).

New York City: The Sixth Element
Aine McGlynn

The first five elements of Native Tongues hip hop are the DJ, the MC, the b-boy, the graffiti artist, and knowledge of self. The sixth, unrecognized one is New York City. Aside from being the birthplace of hip hop, New York is a character that interacts with all the rhymes in the Native Tongues albums. The Jungle Brothers shouted out on “Belly Dancin’ Dina” that they are from 113th Street and Seventh Avenue in Harlem, while Black Sheep’s Dres mentioned that he wished he could get a cab in midtown Manhattan or a slice of pizza no matter where he happened to be in the city. The five boroughs are a central theme on all the Native Tongues albums. De La Soul shouted out their Long Island heritage as often as possible, while Tribe’s Phife Dawg rapped about the New York Knicks, the Yankees, Mets, and Vinnie Testaverde, the quarterback of the New York Jets. In spite of the fact that Native Tongues philosophy was resistant to myths of American nationalism, the pride of being from New York City was always a part of their sound. This can be attributed to the varied textures of the city itself. It is more of a microcosm of the world than a place where American nation making occurs. It is home to representatives from all corners of the planet, and in its 321 square miles it holds infinite possibilities for shaping not only one’s Saturday night but one’s deepest sense of self.
In this environment, violence was a natural outlet for the frustration felt by the most abused and marginalized members of a crumbling outer borough. In the South Bronx, gang violence between such groups as the Black Spades, the Chingalings, and the Savage Nomads threatened to erupt into full-scale warfare. The sense of community and solidarity that might have existed after the heady days of the civil rights movement had grown thin and anemic. The prophets of equality and reform, JFK, Dr. King, Robert Kennedy, and Malcolm X had all been brutally exterminated, and in the void of social justice, the urban population experienced a collective, alienating grief that grew into an oppressive anger, which manifested in self- and community-directed violence.

After the tragic spring of 1968, gang life took on the quality of inevitability for young men in the South Bronx. To be outside on the street was to be vulnerable. Being associated with the gang that controlled a given street neutralized some of that vulnerability. The goal of inner-city gangs, of all violent collectives in fact, is to expand power and territory bases. Bronx gang territories were delineated by streets, schools, playgrounds, and bodegas. Intimate knowledge of the landscape was essential to any Bronx youth trying to negotiate the complex maps of belonging and conflict. As the city and state authorities were unable, or perhaps unwilling, to assuage the gang conflict, it became apparent that any kind of revolution of ideas would have to happen from within. It was up to the community to heal its own divisions. At the first truce meeting held in December 1971, Charlie Suarez, the infamous captain of the Ghetto Brothers, “opened the meeting with a command: ‘I would like for the police to leave or we got nothing to say’” (Chang 58). A treaty was signed that depended on each gang respecting each other’s turf. The streets in the Bronx were once again to become neutral environments where Latinos, blacks, and whites were, in theory at least, safe to interact with each other.

The record collection is an ideal metaphor for what the peacemakers were trying to achieve. Afrika Bambaataa, one of the founding fathers of hip hop
and a former Black Spade, learned from his mother’s eclectic record collection that South African spiritual music could rub up against northern soul, which could sit happily beside Motown doo-wop. An avid music fan, Bambaataa had no trouble finding a great drumbeat from a Monkees single that would make a crowd jump up and dance. When Bambaataa discovered and played those records for a Bronx crowd that would normally disdain them, he disrupted a whole set of stereotypes and limitations that kept kids from exploring a varied range of musical possibilities.

Bambaataa’s most significant contribution to the renaissance that took place in the Bronx in the early 1970s was his undying faith in the power of a booty-shakin’ good time to bring a group of people together. The block parties thrown by Bambaataa and his crew, the Organization, transformed the community’s old associations between the street and violence. Instead of “beating each other upside the head like they used to do in the gang days,” Jazzy J recalled, block parties saw kids “doing something constructive . . . plugging into lampposts” and playing records until the early hours of the morning (Chang 97).

THE MEDIUM NEEDS A MESSAGE

The parties, as unifying as they were, were not something to believe in. There was still a void from the end of the civil rights movement that left these young hip hop heads without a directive, a policy, or a message that would give this energetic new outlet called hip hop the feeling of manifesto, of destiny. It took Afrika Bambaataa to shape the message. Bambaataa was the founder of the Universal Zulu Nation, which preached freedom, justice, wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Bambaataa developed these principles into the Seven Infinity Lessons of the Universal Zulu Nation (see sidebar: The Infinity Lessons of the Universal Zulu Nation). At the heart of the Lessons is a drive toward empowerment through a process of coming to truth. This truth

The Infinity Lessons of the Universal Zulu Nation
Aine McGlynn

The Infinity Lessons were derived from the tenets of the Five Percenter faith and advocated by Afrika Bambaataa as a platform from which the Zulu Nation could spread their message. They formed a basic set of rules of behavior for members of the Zulu Nation but also packaged the movement for travel beyond the South Bronx. One of the most beautiful and appealing aspects of the lessons is the fact that they are never complete. They can always, at any time, by any member, be added to. Indeed, a visit to the Zulu Nation’s Web site evidences the often complex and detailed additions that members make to the lessons. There is, however, a set of fundamental ideals around which
they shift and develop. Among them is the focus on coming to know the self, recognizing that the Universal Zulu Nation is the “truth” and that any real change must come not from mere uncovering of the systems of power and oppression but from recognizing the god within oneself. The fact that the philosophy of the movement is open to improvement and innovation is one of the reasons that the Zulu Nation gelled so comfortably with the Native Tongues, and with hip hop more generally. Hip hop at its best is about the creativity that can happen within a specific moment; this is the legacy of the street corner ciphers, freestyle sessions where the beatboxer provided the rhythm and the rapper came up with rhymes right on the spot. In its purest form, hip hop is dynamic and constantly morphing in the same way as the Infinity Lessons do.

consisted of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of the self, to the self, and by the self. It was up to the members of the Native Tongues collective to bring this message to a wide audience. Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation were the philosophical touchstone for all the early albums produced by the collective’s core members. As a collective, they worked to promote not only the ideas of the Universal Zulu Nation but each other’s albums as well, counting on the probability that success for one would translate into success for all. It was the philosophy of the Zulu Nation, which they held with such conviction, that gave them something meaningful to rap about and which, ironically, ended up forming the backbone of the posse’s commercial success. Though each member of the posse was unique, they were bound together by what set them apart from every other rap group bursting onto the scene.

INTRODUCING THE MEMBERS

The Jungle Brothers

The Jungle Brothers were Afrika Baby Bambaataa, both a DJ and an MC or rapper; Sammy B, a DJ; and Mike G, also an MC. The Jungle Brothers (the JBs) emerged out of New York in the late eighties and released their debut, Straight Out the Jungle, in 1988. Theirs was a sound immediately distinguishable from those of their contemporaries. Their eclectic mix of samples from jazz, rock, soul, reggae, African spirituals, and blues produced a hip hop with an emphasis on musicality and melody. Not only was the album easy to listen to, the lyrics were unmistakably political, advocating sexual equality and unity within the African American community. Their next album, Done by the Forces of Nature (1989), is one of hip hop’s most danceable albums. The hooks they used and the tunes they sampled were beautifully melodic and the bass was deeper and more compelling than on their debut. Their later efforts, J. Beez Wit the Remedy (1993) and Raw Deluxe (1997), did not achieve any
notable success with hip hop audiences. These later efforts, along with *All That We Do* (2002), reestablished the JBs with a trip-house music audience.

**De La Soul**

De La Soul (De La) owed much of their sound and success to the Jungle Brothers. The group, made up of Posdnous (Plug One), Trugoy the Dove (Plug Two), and Pacemaster Mase (Plug Three), were the most commercially successful members of the Native Tongues collective. Their first album, *3 Feet High and Rising* (1989) was produced by Prince Paul and recalls the sound of the JB’s debut. The liner notes feature a comic about the making of the album; the three members of De La are drawn stressing out about not being able to produce the album in time and calling in the JBs to help them out. The resulting album is a hip hop classic that reflects the inclusive, hippie-inspired roots of De La’s D.A.I.S.Y. Age (Da Inner Sound Y’all) philosophy of spreading love and positivity. Their follow-up album, *De La Soul Is Dead* (1991), was more aggressive in its sound and its content. Gone were the songs about three being a magic number or tracks about washing yourself with soap to get rid of your stink, rhymed over a sample of the bass line from “Stand by Me.” Instead the album pulsed with more aggressive tracks such as “Rap de Rap Show” and “Afro Connections at a Hi 5 (In the Eyes of the Hoodlum),” disparaging the “hard acts” who called their style soft. Because they had achieved a significant amount of commercial success, they were repeatedly accused of crossing over by rappers who didn’t take kindly to De La’s making fun of their ultra-macho gangsta personas. Their next two albums, *Buhloone Mind State* (1993) and *Stakes Is High* (1996), continued to express their frustration with fame and the accusations of selling out. These two albums attempted to distance the group from the mainstream by making references to hip hop history that only the most dedicated hip hop head would comprehend. Nonetheless, their flow, style, and Prince Paul’s faultless production resulted in innovative albums that continued to achieve popularity outside of the typical rap audience (see sidebar: Prince Paul). The group released two albums, *Art Official Intelligence* (1999) and *AOI: Bionix* (2001), as part of

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**Prince Paul**

*Aine McGlynn*

Prince Paul is the legendary hip hop DJ and producer who produced De La Soul’s debut, *3 Feet High and Rising*, in 1989, as well as a couple of tracks on Queen Latifah’s *All Hail the Queen*. He went on to produce De La’s next two albums as well, and along with the influence of the Jungle Brothers, his playfulness and tight beats were a major shaping influence for the Native Tongues sound. Never one to be contained by genres, Prince Paul brought an open-mindedness to De La’s sound that was uniquely his own. Paul
introduced De La to the concept of album-unifying skits. The skits would carry some of the thematic weight of the album and create the sense of a singular work which Paul felt was vital to any album, and which is a distinctive characteristic of Prince Paul–produced albums. Paul produces conceptual albums that have a thought-out plan which articulates a single philosophy or idea.

Born in New York City, Prince Paul began his musical career with Stetsasonic, a hip hop group that got its start in the early eighties. Their live instrumentation and upbeat lyricism put them on the map and made Prince Paul the natural choice to be the producer for the positive, conscious rap that De La Soul was making at mid-decade. After working with De La, Prince Paul released two of his own albums before teaming up with RZA from Wu-Tang, Too Poetic, and Frukwan to form the Gravediggaz. Most recently, Prince Paul has teamed up with DJ Dan the Automator to form Handsome Boy Modeling School. Their albums So . . . How’s Your Girl and White People showcase an innovative blend of trip hop, rap, rock, folk, nu metal, R&B, and comedy. It featured as disparate a lineup as Thom Yorke from Radiohead, Sean Lennon, Roisin Murphy, Del tha Funky Homosapien, Lord Finesse, Linkin Park, and comedian Father Guido Sarducci. Paul’s post–Native Tongues days saw him continually articulating powerful critiques of the hyperconsumerism that began to plague hip hop from the early nineties. In a recent interview with New York Magazine, Paul insists that he will produce one more album as Prince Paul, and that it will be his last attempt to change the world. It is this type of ambitious optimism that Paul not only saw mirrored in the Native Tongues movement but also helped to inspire that movement.

an ambitious trilogy. The third album in the trilogy was never released, but De La’s most recent album, The Grind Date (2004), redeemed them somewhat in the eyes of their critics and faithful fans. The opening track locates them in the past, present, and future of hip hop and reminds the listener right off the bat that this music is carrying a message, and a positive one at that. The rest of the album features musical samples, melodic tunefulness, and locates De La as successful, long-standing patriarchs of the hip hop family.

A Tribe Called Quest

A Tribe Called Quest, or Tribe, consists of Q-Tip and Phife Dawg as the MCs, Ali Shaheed Muhammed the DJ, and Jarobi, who appears only on their first album, People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm (1990). Tribe’s sound was a jazzier version of the danciness that characterized the JB’s albums, while Phife’s raspy growl and complicated sports metaphors and Q-Tip’s nasal, New York accent made Tribe a unique and vital addition to the underground hip hop landscape (see sidebar: Underground Hip Hop under Kool Herc).
They followed up the critical success of their first album with a second, equally acclaimed record, *The Low End Theory* (1991), which improved on their first album by combining thumping beats with an elegant jazz vibe. Critics have described this album as not only gracefully sampling jazz but also reflecting a similar kind of creative process. Like *The Low End Theory*, jazz recordings are a testament to a series of creative moments and interactions, rather than a singular act. The album was a unique blend of timely critical raps, innovative aesthetic considerations, and thumping bass breaks that moved the genre forward.

Their next album, *Midnight Marauders* (1993), kept the party going, but at the expense of some of the tight rhyme style and vexing content that made the previous two such standalone works of art. Nonetheless, the playfulness still pervaded the album. Unfortunately, by the time *Beats, Rhymes and Life* was released three years later, the sense of humor had all but disappeared and the rhymes were tight yet vacant boasts of their rhyme skills. The beats nonetheless still bounced. The last album the group released before the tribe dissolved was *The Love Movement* (1998). It bounced with the same tight production and booty-shakin’ beats, but again the social and political urgency was missing, reflecting a general trend in hip hop at the turn of the century.

*Black Sheep*

Made up of Dres and Mista Lawnge, Black Sheep were the slightly more raunchy, slightly less peace loving, cousin to the tightly knit brotherhood of Tribe, De La, and the JBs. They came to attention touring with the JBs in the late eighties and through Dres’s appearances on De La’s *De La Soul Is Dead* (1991). Black Sheep had a massive hit with “The Choice Is Yours” from their debut album, *A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing* (1991). As a result, the album sold close to a million copies and was popular with both the traditional rap audience and the mainstream college radio stations. Unfortunately, the success didn’t extend to their second album, *Non-Fiction* (1994) forwent the genuinely hilarious skits and raunchy playfulness of their debut for a more earnest autobiographical sketch of their transition from South Carolina to New York City. The failure of this album, somewhat attributable to the lack of marketing support from their record company, marked the end of Black Sheep.

*Chi-Ali*

The youngest member of the Native Tongues posse, Chi-Ali turned heads with his appearance on Black Sheep’s “Pass the 40” and “Have U.N.E. Pull.” At thirteen, he rapped about not being old enough to smoke joints or drink, but being old enough to attract the ladies. He gained enough attention to get a record deal out of his guest spots. *The Fabulous Chi-Ali* (1991) was the first...
album the Beatnuts ever produced, and it exists more as a testament to their early production talents than as evidence of Chi-Ali’s MC skills. At fourteen, with a hit single in “Age Ain’t Nothing but a Number,” Chi-Ali might, if not for the fickleness of the market and perhaps a breaking voice, have had a lasting career. Unfortunately, like Another Bad Connection, Kriss Kross, and other such kiddie rap acts of the day, he was destined to remain a one-hit wonder. The appearance by Phife of Tribe and Mista Lawnge of Black Sheep were meant to legitimize him as a rapper, but their experienced flows merely revealed Chi-Ali’s immaturity and ill-formed rhymes.

SELLING THE MESSAGE

Like every other genre of music, hip hop has a marketing hook, a saleable feature that convinces shoppers that they are buying more than an album. Rock and roll banks on its attitude, funk makes you hustle, jazz trades on its vibe, and the blues sells you your melancholy. Hip hop, on the other hand, promises a message. In fact in 1982, one of the earliest commercial successes of hip hop was the Furious Five’s aptly titled “The Message.” This track defined the genre in a number of ways. It told the story of a young man who is pushed to the brink by the degradation he witnesses in his neighborhood. “The Message” was an unusual track to emerge as a signal of the future of hip hop. It was downtempo, focused on the MC rather than the DJ, and was packed with consciousness-raising commentary on the state of the urban jungle. It diverged from how hip hop had been developing in the early 1970s. People went to block parties and listened to DJs spin records in order to dance, to gather together and forget the realities of their inner city lives. It took the release of “The Message” before hip hop achieved any mainstream music industry attention. This was not just about hedonism. This was, to the leftist liberal media especially, the kind of urgent wake-up call that needed to come out of the lowest class to challenge the conservatism of Reaganomics. This legitimating attention, not to mention a decent paycheck for Melle Mel and the Furious Five, shaped the future of the genre. Hip hop was no longer a careless grassroots movement for the community’s enjoyment. It was a vehicle for talking about the needs and frustrations of a community, and in a revolutionary turn, this expression of anger could be lucrative. Thus the saleable myth of hip hop was born; its makers were urban, black, poor, and frustrated, and their music was patently designed to carry this message. The hip hop that moved records had a consciousness that moved minds toward activism and a break and bass line that moved asses as well.

It was the very fact of its ability to carry a philosophy that drew critical and thus industry attention to hip hop. This no doubt also influenced the Native Tongues’ allegiance to Zulu Nation philosophy. The commercial pressures of the record industry versus the contradictory desire to pursue right knowledge
and community uplift is a central tension in the Native Tongues narrative. The collective was ultimately united by its positive philosophy, its motivation to achieve success without selling out, and finally by a sound that called up the formative moments and ideas from the history of hip hop while also signaling the direction that the genre would take. Ironically, all three of these unifying aspects would contribute to the dissolution of the collective, but for a number of years at the end of the eighties and early nineties, the Native Tongues posse deeply influenced hip hop in one of its most formative moments.

DISRUPTING EXPECTATIONS

It was evident in the late eighties that one could make rap music and make money too. It was also becoming clear that rap could be violently aggressive and woman hating. The popularity of 2 Live Crew and N.W.A. attested to this fact. The Native Tongues emerged as a counteractive balance to the serious hatefulness in such tracks as “We Want Some Pussy,” “A Bitch Is a Bitch,” and “Get the Fuck Out of My House.” De La Soul, Black Sheep, and A Tribe Called Quest brought serious playfulness on tracks such as “Similak Child,” “The Magic Number,” and “Ham and Eggs.” The satirical skits and songs that peppered their albums played with the image of the rapper as a thug, a drug-taking urban boogeyman with a chip on his shoulder (see sidebar: Skits).

Skits
Aine McGlynn

As early as the Furious Five’s 1983 hit “The Message,” skits became a fairly common feature in hip hop tracks. For a precedent, one might even look back at Stevie Wonder’s 1973 “Livin’ for the City,” in which Stevie arrives on the bus in New York City and is asked to carry a package across the street. When he does so, he is arrested and the track resumes. Similarly, the skit in the message depicts a conflict, not with the police, but with other people in the neighborhood. The Native Tongues picked up on the trend, using the skit format to speak to the ongoing conflict in their neighborhoods while also injecting some humor into their albums. Often, the more serious vignettes feature, as in the Stevie Wonder track, an encounter with the police. These skits depict the cops as abusing their authority, as dupes and racists. It is as though this depiction of the police must be stated explicitly; it cannot be rapped about. This conflict, because it is so central and common to the experience of being young and black in America, must be articulated as clearly as possible. The other type of conflict often highlighted in the skits is between people within the same neighborhood. This is the type of skit featured on “The Message” and on A Tribe Called Quest’s “The Crew.”
Their playfulness was a check to the narrative that was emerging about what an authentic rapper was to look like, sound like, and rap about. This “authentic” rapper was a man who had suffered and was damned if he wasn’t going to let everyone know about it. It is a tendency of journalistic and scholarly writing about African American art forms to make an overly simplistic association between that community’s suffering and their creative expressions. This connection between suffering and art is a reduction of the art to pathology. Pathology, defined as the essential nature of a disease, is a loaded word to use to speak about African American art. To read black art as being essentially about struggle and pain suggests that the natural or essential condition of a black person in America is to be plagued or diseased by the suffering that he or she endures. This reading often sells the artist short as it suggests that the art is not subject to aesthetic or stylistic concerns. To always suggest that the product of African American creativity is about suffering limits the possibility for expression on the part of the artist while also limiting the way in which that art object can be read. The attention that aggressive, violent, and misogynistic rap albums received in the late eighties and early nineties was, to some extent, the mainstream media looking for expressions of black art that confirmed the already entrenched association between black art and suffering. The Native Tongues, by contrast were quietly releasing albums that had little to do with gun play, gang allegiance, and beating women.

The Jungle Brothers’ second album, *Done by the Forces of Nature*, for example, is an eminently danceable album. It is full of heady beats and celebratory melodies and messages, such as on the tracks “Good Newz Comin’”
and “Beeds on a String.” This album doesn’t paint a picture of an abused race of people who are destined for further abuse. Rather, it is full of positive messages of solidarity among like-minded people. It compels the listener to move forward beyond pathological constructions of the black person as angry and downtrodden. This message of celebration and joy was, since Bambaataa rollicked through “Unity Part 1 (The Third Coming),” a specific strategy for moving a people beyond the idea of themselves as victims of marginalization.

WOMEN AND THE NATIVE TONGUES

The Princess of the Posse

The members of the Native Tongues posse also clearly set themselves apart from other rap groups in the 1990s in their attitude toward women. Queen Latifah was among the first members of Native Tongues. At eighteen, Latifah released her first album, *All Hail the Queen*, which achieved moderate commercial success. Nonetheless, on the cover Latifah, clad in a head wrap, took a proudly defiant stance with the African continent looming over her shoulder. This was an image of a female that stood out in contrast to the degrading references to women that were spilling so easily out of MCs’ mouths. Queen Latifah, in the very fact of being a woman and an MC with unquestionable skills on the microphone, helped to cement the philosophy of the Native Tongues as inclusive, progressive, and far more respectful of women than their gangster counterparts. At a time when the controversy over 2 Live Crew’s obnoxiously misogynistic lyrics was raging, Latifah appeared on the remix of De La Soul’s “Buddy,” which is one of only a few truly collaborative tracks that the Native Tongues produced.

The Native Tongues weren’t the only collaborative acts in hip hop at the time. Producer Marley Marl brought together the Juice Crew to produce 1988’s “Symphony.” The track was a huge hit, leading to successful careers for its performers, Biz Markie, Kool G Rap, Masta Ace, and Big Daddy Kane, just some of the members of the Juice Crew. At the end of the 1980s the posse was becoming a widespread and well-proved method by which a group of rappers could achieve notoriety in the press, among listeners, and within the rap community. With the posse, though, came the attempt on the part of every member to outshine everyone else under the guise of creating music together.

“Buddy,” one of the Native Tongues’ early forays into collaboration, features Queen and De La, Q-Tip and Phife Dawg from A Tribe Called Quest, as well as the Jungle Brothers and Monie Love. Latifah and Monie Love participate in the track’s playfully macho banter about having sex. The men refer to their penises as their “jimmies,” and the women they pick up as their
“buddies.” Monie’s rap, along with Latifah’s skit with the French rapper Lucien at the end of the track, acknowledges that female sexual desire can be just as playful as that of their male counterparts. This is not a narrative of sex as a violent assertion of power, but rather a celebration of men and women as joyfully sexual beings.

The empowered female that Latifah portrayed on All Hail the Queen and on the collaborative tracks she produced with the Native Tongues is not all that remarkable. By 1989, Salt-N-Pepa and MC Lyte had achieved notably successful albums. What was unique about Latifah was the combination of Afrocentric solidarity that she derived straight from Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation and the narrative of late-twentieth-century feminism. In the discourse that surrounds black femininity, there are pointed references to the choice that must be made between two allegiances, one based on gender and the other on race. It is often thought that in African or Afrocentric philosophy the female must occupy a subordinate role to her man. This suggests that a woman who is influenced by twentieth-century feminist thinking cannot take on the philosophy of Afrocentrism because the two systems contradict each other. Nowhere is this tension more evident in the hip hop community than in an infamous 1991 interview between Angela Davis, a professor of women’s studies and African American studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Ice Cube, a rapper who is often credited with coining the term “gangsta rap.” Davis had been a Black Panther in the 1960s and had embraced the politics of black nationalism. Thirty years later, as she sat down with Cube, she was disturbed by what she saw as a new misogynistic Afrocentrism that was pervading youth culture. Davis’s generation had somewhat successfully disrupted the connection between nationalism and patriarchy, and here in front of her was a young man who represented a whole generation’s attempt to reestablish that destructive relationship.

Queen Latifah, who cites Davis as a major influence, collaborated with Monie Love on “Ladies First,” a track which articulates a black feminism that engages not just with the reality of being a woman but also with the condition of the African diaspora. In the video for the song, Latifah aligns herself with the historical figures that are projected behind her and who saw no need to choose between fighting for their race and fighting for their gender. For them, and for Latifah, the challenge was to support not female over male or vice versa, but rather to recognize the larger difference between the haves and the have-nots.

*The Boys Follow Suit*

The rest of the Native Tongues posse, overwhelmingly male as they were, nonetheless took up this same Afro-feminist philosophy. A Tribe Called Quest recorded such tracks as “Description of a Fool,” which includes in its description of a fool a woman-hating abusive man. De La Soul also
pointed to respecting a sister by never violating her physically or emotionally on “I Be Blowin,” and penned an anti-incest track called “Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa.” These tracks emphasize that the Native Tongues are on the opposite end of the spectrum from the aggressive gangsta and booty rap that was gaining popularity. Nevertheless, though the boys of Native Tongues might have been protofeminists, they also produced raunchy tracks about their sexcapades where the women they encounter are no more than conquests. Phife Dawg from Tribe was particularly raunchy in his tone on such tracks as “Electric Relaxation” and “Hot Sex on a Platter.” Even the collaborations “La Menage” on A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing and “De La Orgy” on 3 Feet High and Rising are bold-faced description of sex, wherein the men engage in hypermasculine boasts about how well endowed they are and how easily they can conquer a “bitch” or a “ho.” There is, however, a difference between these tracks and, for example, 2 Live Crew’s “Fuckshop.” Not only is the raunch taken to a whole new level on the latter’s recordings, but an unmatched level of scorn and aggression is directed toward women as well. In the Native Tongues tracks the emphasis is on bolstering masculinity and equating that with being an MC. This, for example, is why there are rampant metaphorical parallels between their dicks and their microphones. For 2 Live Crew, however, the emphasis is arguably entirely on the degradation of the woman, of reducing her to a receptacle rather than on shaping their conceptions of themselves as men. It would be a mistake even to refer to a personality in these tracks. They are devoid of a “she” or a “her” because the body that is being rapped about has been stripped of all identity and worth. Compare this to Black Sheep’s (f/ Q-Tip) “La Menage,” where there is at least a courting and some flirting before the sex is described. The woman is actually present beyond the description of her body parts.

In spite of the respect the Native Tongues generally afforded to women in their raps, it took Black Sheep to acknowledge the complexity of female-male relationships within the context of rap music as a genre. The skit “L.A.S.M.” on Black Sheep’s A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing embodies many of the complexities of the Afro-feminist position. The skit features Dres and Mista Lawnge being interviewed by the Ladies Against Sexist Motherfuckers. They parody the character of the conceited, sexist rapper and do nothing to improve their situation by telling the interviewer that ho is an abbreviation for honey. The interviewer explodes at them, telling them that they give men a bad name and refusing to let them defend themselves. In the skit, there is a subtle working out of the tension between the playful fiction of the characters Dres and Mista Lawnge, and the serious accusations of misogyny being launched against them by short-fused feminists. There is a suggestion that some feminism is misguided and that it mistakes the invented characters and situations of rap lyricism for literal stances on male-female relationships. The interviewer in the skit asks Dres and Mista Lawnge if they really think that people want to hear them refer to women so disparagingly. The answer that the two MCs are
not allowed to give is, “Well, of course they do.” To back up this claim, Dres would merely have to cite Ice Cube’s record sales figures. On the album the track “U Mean I’m Not” is a parody of gangster rap, wherein Dres growls about shooting his sister for using his toothbrush and his mother for breaking his egg yolk. Black Sheep’s position here is unique within the Native Tongues posse. They admit through these parodies that they are aware of, and to some extent complicit with, what was becoming the saleable myth of the macho, hyperaggressive masculine rapper. While the rest of the posse rapped about respect for women, Black Sheep discovered and pointed out a fundamentally patriarchal trajectory in the marketing and development of the genre.

The groups within the posse were able to make isolated critiques not only of a generalized society or system of oppression but of the specific way that those prejudices worked within the rap game. They could identify the points at which the record industry tried to shape their images and aesthetics in order to move albums. Whether or not they would be able to resist it remained to be seen.

THE ROLE OF THE COLLECTIVE

*United They Rapped: In Defense of “Pease”*

The effectiveness of the collective was only as strong as each group’s record sales. The success of one group reflected on the success of the second group and encouraged the album sales of the third group. Put simply, the effectiveness of the Native Tongues collective (and others to come including Wu-Tang Clan, Diddy’s Bad Boy Posse, Busta’s Flip Mode Squad, the Quannum Collective, etc.) traded on the voracious nature of hip hop fans. Hip hop from its early days was not merely something that you listened to. Rap music was a felt experience that fans attuned their whole lifestyles to. You collected a group’s records, sought out their remixes, dug through crates for the samples they used, and, most important for the Native Tongues in terms of sales and spreading the message, bought the albums that your favorite MC guested on.

As their album sales rose, particularly in the case of A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul, they attracted a new white fan base. The Native Tongues were accused of crossing over, abandoning their black fans, and selling out to a mainstream audience. Curiously, no one accused Chuck D and Public Enemy of the same thing in spite of the fact their 1989 album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, competed toe-to-toe with De La Soul’s and was also popular with white listeners. Both groups sold counterculturalism to their listeners but from opposite ends of the spectrum. This defiant stance was eminently marketable to a white suburban population schooled on their parents’ reminiscences of Bob Dylan going electric and the Beatles’ shaggy haircuts. While the gangster or hard-core version of counterculture involved
finding violent individualistic solutions to a problem, conscious rappers such as De La and Tribe put their faith in the potential power of the collective struggle to effect community change over the long run.

At a time when such gangsta rap groups as N.W.A. were splintering, the Native Tongues were coming together. For the groups in the posse there was strength in numbers. They had to face major criticisms within the rap community about their record sales, the demographics of their fan base, and the playful, uplifting nature of their rap. Their response to these challenges was multifaceted. For De La it involved satire and straightforward lyrical defense of their position, while for Tribe, making as many heads bounce as possible was enough to legitimize their existence at the top of the record charts.

On their second album, De La chose to counter the accusations of being soft by parodying the haters who put their style down. Shaped by a more thumping beat and warnings about the strength of their crew, the album attempted to defend the Native Tongues philosophy while at the same time realigning them with some measure of what was becoming “authentic” rap music. Authenticity in rap music is a vexed issue. Simply put, to be real in the early nineties became equated with viciousness and hardness. The gang territories that had been made obsolete by the unifying principle of the beat were being redrawn between those acts who performed hardness and anger and those who performed the Bambaataa-like role of the missionary or proselytizer.

On *De La Soul Is Dead*, “Pease Porridge,” a track about consuming peacefulness in the form of a bowl of porridge, exemplifies this tension between lyrically defending the ideals of the collective and coming across as hard enough to back up that defense. The track begins with two guys talking threateningly about how wack De La is. Posdnous begins his rhyme by calling out the names of the Native Tongues posse, evoking the strength of their numbers. He admits that their records are played on the radio as well as by the type of brothers whose malignant posturing opened up the track. He points out that in spite of De La being peace loving, the voices of the haters are getting more and more obnoxious, demanding an active response. From there the track moves on to a skit featuring two girls talking about witnessing De La, Tribe, and the Jungle Brothers beating up some kids who called them hippies. One of the girls is incredulous because she thought that the Native Tongues were peace-loving pacifists. Mase goes on to rap about the lack of contradiction between bringing peace and losing one’s temper. For that reason, the track keeps returning to the choral loop where the title, “Pease Porridge,” derived from a children’s nursery rhyme, is repeated over and over by an innocuous male voice.

The fluctuation between the aggression and anger felt by Mase, Dove, and Pos and their desire to stay peaceful by consuming the porridge is indicative of the double position that the Native Tongues were forced to take. Forced
into this dual stance by criticisms from those who accused them of not being true to a so-called authentic conception of hip hop, much of the political and social urgency that fleshed out their earlier albums gave way to defensive posturing.

The track concludes with an imitation of Kermit the Frog talking about how always eating porridge keeps one peaceful. But the childishness of the reference undercut the effectiveness of the strategy for grown men. Following Kermit, Tribe’s Jarobi imitates a Hindi man who describes the peacefulness with which people eat porridge in his land and how perplexed he is by the violence that occurs between people in America. This becomes the conclusive statement for the track. It suggests that even when the desire to consume the porridge is present, the aggression and jealousy that surround the consumer don’t allow him to eat peacefully. There is always someone or something that will irritate one enough to distract one from the act of physically taking in the principles of passivism and gentility. In contrast to ingesting peace, having it become part of one’s essence, authenticity in rap music is put on like a Hilfiger sweater, strapped on like a .45 pistol; it is the performance of threat on the part of a black male who believes that no other identity is available to him.

The description of being interrupted while trying to eat porridge is as much a statement about De La Soul’s desire to stick to positive rhymes and consciousness-raising rap as it is about the choice facing the record buyer. Presented with the choice between rap that offers a strategy for productive subversion of society, and a record that is more aggressive and overt (i.e., violent) in its image of resistance to the dominant, the tendency will be—record and concert sales attest to this fact—to choose the latter. As a collective, the Native Tongues could be more effective in countering the seductive image of the gangsta rapper. De La could put up the lyrical defense, the JBs could continue to make innovative beats and sounds that no hip hop fan or ignorant hater could resist moving to, and Tribe could bring the jazz-inflected party vibes that you could bump in your car. Taken together, they made up an encompassing sound, style, and politic that was as diverse as gangsta and booty rap were monolithic.

Speaking in Tongues: The Sound and the Posse

It was not merely their messianic proselytizing about the lessons of the Zulu Nation that compelled the Native Tongues to form a collective. They shared a sonic aesthetic that is still identifiable today and which, when paired with consciousness of self, marks Native Tongues–inflected hip hop as a unique subgenre. By the time Latifah’s album came out and the Jungle Brothers had released Straight Out the Jungle (1988), rap music had been transformed from the live happenings of the early eighties. At block parties and clubs all over the country, the DJs took center stage spinning and scratching their way
through funk, disco, and jazz classics. Once rap music became committed to wax, the MC’s rhymes were foregrounded at the expense of the DJ’s on-the-spot innovation, which was so central to the definition of a hip hop party in the early days.

In spite of the fact that on a record the lyricism of these MCs arguably occupied a more prominent role than the DJ’s skills, the Jungle Brothers stayed true to the original block party format, wherein the DJ still had creative control. Sammy B dug deep into his crates of old records in order to sample reggae, calypso, African jive, James Brown, Parliament Funkadelic, and even some rock and roll classics. Sampling from a deep and wide collection of records recalled the early Bronx DJs Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Grandwizard Theodore, and of course Afrika Bambaataa. This breadth and eccentricity became an identifiable central feature of the Native Tongues sound and arguably their politics as well. The samples they used were not merely about melody or tune; they carried much of the narrative weight for the track. In a poem, a word is chosen not merely because it rhymes but because of what it suggests about the overall theme. The samples that the Native Tongues chose similarly performed not only aural duties but also the task of telling the story and informing the theme on a given track. For instance, on the opening track of the JB’s *Done by the Forces of Nature*, “Beyond This World,” Mike G raps about being underground, being Afro-centric, and being sent to earth to educate his listeners. This reference to coming from outer space is about being marginalized, but it also calls to mind Zulu Nation metaphysics that see consciousness of self as unbound by the limits of earthly time and space. Mike G lyrically calls to mind this philosophy, but the sound transmits the message as well. He shouts out the Zulu Nation and immediately the track gives way to a classic Kraftwerk break that is singularly reminiscent of Afrika Bambaataa. This inclusive, electro-funk-infused album echoed Afrika Bambaataa’s sound more directly than any other album produced by the Native Tongues collective. This referential tendency in the JBs was vital to the development of the Native Tongues sound because of the influence of the JBs on both De La and Tribe’s prolific sound.

In the comic strip that illustrates the story of the making of the album *3 Feet High and Rising* (1989), it is revealed that De La Soul arrived from Mars to meet with a record executive who told them to make haste with the production of their album. While the extraterrestrial theme echoes Bambaataa’s philosophy about the energy and power of life outside our galaxy, De La are also confirmed as members of the posse through the aural cues that pervade the album. In the same comic strip, Pos, Mase, and Dove call on the JBs to help them produce the album, and indeed tracks such as “Transmitting Live from Mars” and “The Magic Number” are inflected by the eclecticism that defined the JB’s sound on their own debut. On the latter track alone, the samples include Led Zeppelin’s “The Crunge,” *Schoolhouse Rock*’s
“Magic Number,” Johnny Cash’s “Five Feet High and Rising,” an Eddie Murphy sample, and a Bill Cosby one too.

These references taken together on a single track create a layering of meanings. The position and relationship between each of the samples on “The Magic Number” affect the way the track is interpreted. “The Magic Number” identifies each member of the group and defines what they as individual rappers, and as a group, stand for. Led Zeppelin’s “The Crunge” is reminiscent of a classic funk record and Robert Plant parodies James Brown, calling out to the band for the bridge. De La, using such a parodic sample in their own parody of the kid’s tune “Three Is a Magic Number” multiplies the level of interpretation. Their use of the Zeppelin tune locates them artistically within a conversation about stylistic borrowing and parody. In their form—two MCs and a DJ—they are firmly located within the hip hop community, but their willingness to call to mind Johnny Cash and Led Zeppelin, two decidedly un–hip hop acts, opens up the doors of possibility of hip hop sound. De La’s innovation was noted throughout the rap community, as the free and wide sampling on the Beastie Boys’ 1989 Paul’s Boutique attests. In a single track on that album there are samples from as many as fourteen to twenty different sources, including Dylan, Zepplin, Afrika Bambaataa, and the occasional bong hit. This type of eclectic sampling harkens back to Grampa Bam’s philosophy and sound. On “Unity Part 1,” Afrika Bambaataa raps about listening to new wave, punk, and rock and roll in his urging to the audience to unify in the name of having a good time.

Similarly, A Tribe Called Quest’s sampling of Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side” on their track “Can I Kick It?” marked Tribe as advocating the same sort of block party eclecticism that defined the Bronx’s epic street jams. In his rhyme, Q-Tip explicitly suggests that Tribe will not shy away from having funk beats meet rock and roll tunes. Adding a third level of sonic references, Tip tells listeners to do the jitterbug to this track if they want to dance. “The Jitterbug” was a hit for Cab Calloway in 1934. Calloway might be considered one of the ancestors of hip hop as his skat style pays attention to rhythmic lyricism in the same way that rap does. The lyrical and sonic cues used by the members of the Native Tongues posse united them as a collective with a shared aesthetic. Those samples contribute to the theme of the given song while also marking out the conscious choice on the part of the collective to call to mind the roots of hip hop not only in the Bronx, but in the entire catalogue of American music. This is the point at which aesthetics meet the inclusive politics of the posse.

Aside from a tendency to sample similarly, the posse was united in their rhyme style. The shared tendency to rap smoothly, without aggression, ending the rhyme right on the drumbeat, are features that are most recognizable on the early nineties albums. This rhyme style shifted to some extent later in the decade. The shift was evidence of the movement away from the roots or old-school style of rhyming and into the less message-heavy, more style-conscious
new-school rap. Rapper Busta Rhymes in particular evidences this change. Busta Rhymes came to attention by appearing on A Tribe Called Quest’s “The Scenario” on The Low End Theory. His raspy growl and breakneck flow attracted enough attention to launch Busta’s group, Leaders of the New School, to a new level of popularity. LONS had produced a track for Elektra Records’ fortieth anniversary compilation album and had toured with Public Enemy, but Busta was the breakout star, as his work with Tribe demonstrated. LONS released their own album, A Future Without a Past, in 1991, the same year as The Low End Theory. Their album featured the same playful quality that characterized the rest of the Native Tongues albums up until that point. They rapped playfully about teachers, girls, and trains. The group released a second album in 1993, but at that stage Busta was garnering the majority of the attention, and tensions over his popularity led to their dissolution.

Busta has been vocal about his audience being made up of hard-core or “real” hip hop fans. Part of ensuring that this remained the case was quickening the pace of his vocal delivery. Contrasted with Melle Mel’s or Run-DMC’s slow articulation of their lyrics, in which the line always ended on the beat, Busta’s rhyme blistered. Particularly on tracks such as “P.T.A.” on LONS’s debut album, A Future Without a Past, Busta’s tendency to rhyme around the contours of the beat distinguished what would be called new-school hip hop from classic old-school or golden age hip hop. The quickened rhyme pace and experimentation with line length was a feature that Tribe and De La picked up and which can be heard on their later albums. Busta’s growl also signaled a “hardness” that countered the criticisms of Tribe as having sold out to suburbia, having bowed to the pressures of the censor, and generally becoming soft. This critique, also launched at De La Soul, would be nagging enough to form some early fissures in the connective tissue linking the Native Tongues.

THE BREAKUP OF THE COLLECTIVE: SUCCESS FOR SOME, OBSCURITY FOR OTHERS

Of the founding members, it was De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest who blew up. They were big names in the music industry by the mid-nineties. Their positions on the Billboard Hot 100 list and the Rap Singles charts were secured. They maintained a loyal fan base who consistently bought their albums. Unfortunately, the success that they achieved did not extend to their fellow Native Tongues. The Jungle Brothers largely dropped out of the hip hop scene after the release of their second album and became more dance oriented in their sound. Black Sheep fell victim to record company mismanagement and faded away into relative obscurity, in spite of the fact that their first album sold close to a million copies. Chi-Ali got sent up on an attempted murder charge.
Completely on the other side of the coin is Latifah. Where there is a red carpet, there is Queen Latifah. Ironically, reflected in each of these disparate trajectories is an element of what defined the collective. De La used their lyrics to tell their story, to relate their message in the same way that Melle Mel did back in 1982. Though undoubtedly commercially successful as a group by the time AOI: Bionix was released in 2001, Pos, Mase, and Dove continued to question the value of the almighty dollar and to encourage positivity on such tracks as “Am I Worth You” and “Baby Phat.” Tribe, meanwhile, kept up the party. 2000’s The Love Movement featured, just like all the other Tribe records in the past, ample booty-shaking joints, like “Hot for You,” “The Booty,” and “Like It Like That.” Tribe and De La exemplified the message and the party, the good-time street jam that introduced you to community you got down with, and your place within it. The Jungle Brothers, in their later forays into hip hop psychedelia, followed a direct line down from the cosmic Afro-universalism of the Zulu Nation. This is a difficult philosophy to sustain with any kind of vigor in a market that considered any such inventive conception of race, self, and history too radical to sell to a general public. Black Sheep also fell victim to the market, as Dres explained in a recent interview with Latin Rapper.com. Making pennies from every record that they sold, Black Sheep switched record companies after their first album and suffered the fate of being undermarketed and ignored by Mercury, a record label on the brink of bankruptcy. Their desire to be more than “slaves” to huge record label prophets contributed to their falling out of the public eye. Queen Latifah followed every path and opportunity that opened up to her. She developed her hip hop roots and her Native Tongues philosophy alongside her Hollywood career. She has never strayed very far from the eighteen-year-old woman on the cover of All Hail the Queen, fist raised and chest proudly lifted.

The message, the party, the wide-open universe of the Zulu Nation, the resistance to the record executives, the fame and fortune: the five fingers on the hand that was the Native Tongues collective. Of course, what united them drove them apart. The fame and fortune of some led to jealousy and envy among those not granted the same success. The techno-soul cosmic sound of Bambaataa became dated as bass lines deepened and that West Coast P-Funk whine captivated the expanding hip hop generation. Even the record labels couldn’t be resisted. Eventually the reality of being under a lucrative contract exerted pressures on creativity that made the activist or resistant position from which the Native Tongues had proselytized a hypocritical one.

The party still happened, but even then, what was there to celebrate anymore? Back in the day, it was a novelty to be on the street after dark, partying among Spades and Nomads, Zulus and Gestapos. Where fear had been, and death had threatened, beats prevailed and decks revolved. These were community celebrations of youth, of potential, of a future for an embattled population. Now the party was about the size of the yacht that cruised around
Miami, how many crates of Crystal were on board, and how dental floss-thin the girls’ thongs were. This was not the same kind of celebration. It was a showing off of capital gains, wherein women were part of that gain, and an indulgence in an image that aimed to provoke jealousy, emulation, and thus product sales. The party was no longer about observing the DJ or the MC, listening to his style and seeing how you could add your own innovation to it. The rarer the sample you found, the more original the track. Now a track is lifted, bass line and melody, a kick and a snare is added, and an MC “yo”s, “ugh”s, and “what”s his way through a vapid list of product endorsements. As for the message of empowerment and knowledge of self, in their last albums it was buried under De La’s constant defending of their success and Q-Tip’s self-aggrandizing rhymes about the smoothness of his flow. When they did attempt to recast the light on their early days of uplifting playfulness and positivity, the result was cringe-worthy tracks such as “The Love,” which boasted an outdated multicultural inclusiveness that had failed to take on the authority of any real political movement.

THE LEGACY OF THE NATIVE TONGUES

Tracks such as “Buddy” on 3 Feet High and Rising, “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children” on All Hail the Queen, “Black Is Black” on Straight Out the Jungle, and “La Menage” on A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing, among others, are truly Native Tongues collaborations. There is buoyancy, perhaps of youth, but also of a group of artists who were proud to know each other. They brought each other up from street corner ciphers, basement recording sessions, and record store crate digging to foist onto the hip hop community a sound and a politic that hadn’t been heard before. By the mid-nineties everyone knew who Latifah was, had heard Black Sheep’s “The Choice Is Yours,” and was aware of a connection between De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest. However, not everyone knew that they were connected through a network called the Native Tongues. De La and Tribe had begun to move huge numbers of records and no longer really needed the support of a wide network of peers to develop their already prolific careers. Many casual listeners of hip hop might recognize “Native Tongues” or “Zulu Nation” as mentions from a couple of tracks, but would not necessarily understand the implication of calling out these associations. Native Tongues-inflected hip hop had become strictly music to get down to. In a sense, there was a reversion to the pre-Afrika Bambaataa moment when the onus on the DJ was to move butts, not raise community consciousness. Though the political message might still have been there in Tribe’s 1994 Midnight Marauders and De La’s 1996 Stakes Is High, by the time Beats, Rhymes and Life and Art Official Intelligence came out, it was clear that nothing was as it had been. In fact, as early as 1993’s Buhloone Mind State, Posdnous noted the changes that were
happening to rap and to the collective. He rapped on “I Am I Be” about the
dissolution of the collective, lamenting about broken promises of unity and
the silence among what had been a tightly knit group of people. While mem-
bers of De La and Tribe remained in contact (Phife appears on a track on
AOI), it seems as though these two groups—and perhaps it is not coincidental
that they were the most successful groups to emerge from the posse—were
unique in their ability to stay connected.

The mid-nineties saw a shift in the market for conscious or positive rap.
Though the message was still largely Afrocentric and related to the philoso-
phy of the Zulu Nation, a quick scan of the faces of the audience at a Tribe or
De La show revealed the nature of their demographic. It was largely white
college kids listening to these albums. The Native Tongues had, to some
extent, lost the war of authenticity that they had tried to avoid by fighting
lyrically and stylistically. They were foreclosed on by black and urban popu-
lations as being crossover acts. However, this rejection of the Native Tongues
by its traditional or intended audience says more about the marketing of hip
hop and its accompanying image than it does about the legitimacy of either
group’s talent.

At mid-decade, the rise of violence glorifying gangsta rap and misogynistic
booby rap were notable. These subgenres of rap came to bear the stamp of
authenticity, in spite of the fact that the Native Tongues were closer to the
roots of hip hop as it was created in the 1970s. The gangsta, however, had a
far more marketable image. The hard-core thug in dark baggy clothes, wear-
ing gang colors, gold in his teeth, and black shades, struck a fierce and im-
mediately identifiable image of defiance and resistance. That same message
of defiance and resistance existed on Native Tongues albums, but Native
Tongues saw adopting a gangsta stance as a problem instead of a solution.
Much of the hip hop that has sold well since the mid-nineties carries with it a
message of violent conflict resolution, hypermasculine homophobia, and ac-
quision of wealth by any means. For the most part, major record labels are
less interested in getting behind conscious hip hop because conscious groups
tend to be less profitable. Nonetheless, there are still a very few hip hop artists
who have managed to walk a fine line between promoting Native Tongues–
style sounds and politics, and getting the support of the hip hop community
and the record labels too.

**Rawkus Records**

Founded on borrowed money in 1995 by a couple of Jewish kids straight
out of college, Rawkus Records was, for a decade at least, a refuge for hip hop
that eschewed bling. Based in New York City, the label reinvigorated under-
ground hip hop, making it easy to love rap music again. Rawkus provided
an alternative sound to the ultrapolished, overproduced radio rap that was
utterly divorced from any sense of hip hop history. Their timing was perfect.
In 1997, Big Pun, Jermaine Dupri, Jay Z, and Snoop were blowing up the charts. Rawkus, meanwhile, signed Company Flow and reinvigorated a hip hop sound that was rough around the edges and in touch with hip hop as a culture and not just a product. Two years later, Rawkus released *Lyricist Lounge* and *Soundbombing*, both albums that showcased the talented MCs that called Rawkus home. Tracks such as “Bring Hip-Hop Back,” “Freestyle,” “B-Boy Document,” and “Da Cipher” evidenced a refocusing on the four elements that hip hop used to hold so dear. The MC, the DJ, the b-boy, and the graffiti artist were privileged once again on these Rawkus compilations. Not only were the four elements on display, but the fifth element, the one that Afrika Bambaataa added, knowledge of self, was there too. The raps were deeply political and critical of the industry, the American government, and rappers who were undeserving of their fame. De La Soul acted as host on *Lyricist Lounge*, introducing each group’s track and confirming that the Native Tongues stamp was still one that carried underground credibility. Q-Tip also guests on a couple of tracks, which highlights the association between urgent, politically motivated hip hop and the Native Tongues as the forefathers of that type of rap.

A more cynical reading of De La and Q-Tip’s presence on these Rawkus records would suggest that they appeared as a means to boost their credibility in the underground hip hop world right as their sound was becoming unpopular to the mainstream. High-profile guest appearances such as theirs work both ways though. Rawkus founders Brian Brater and Jarret Myer no doubt understood the marketing potential of having Tip and De La associated with their label. They also understood that the audience for what remained of the Native Tongues collective was largely white and that Rawkus was likely to attract a similar demographic.

*Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star*

Mos Def became a breakout star for Rawkus, thanks in part to his appearances on the compilation albums but mostly because of the album *Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star*, released in 1999. The reference to “Black Star” lines recalls the shipping line that Marcus Garvey established in 1919 and signaled that Afro-positive politics would be front and center on this record. The album picks up right where the Native Tongues left off (or sold out?). They sample widely from old hip hop flicks like *Style Wars* and update hip hop classics like Slick Rick’s “Children’s Story.” The album even references Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Alex Bradford’s soul musical *Your Arms Are Too Short to Box with God*. Rather than merely speaking about knowledge of self, *Black Star* evidenced what kind of album could be made when knowledge of self was actually achieved. On the track “Thieves in the Night,” *Black Star* managed to respectfully articulate the weaknesses within the Native Tongues philosophy. Mos raps about not being able to understand
why men in the hip hop game have to choose between being “niggers” or “kings” while the women can identify only as “bitches” or “queens.” What he gets at is a widespread disappointment that hip hop has become a polarizing institution where one of two oppositional positions must be taken up.

This is not an indulgent album that displays the kind of defensive posturing that plagued De La and Tribe’s later efforts. Rather, the tracks directly attack what is wrong with the whole industry. Mos and Kweli go right after the marketing strategies that, purely in the name of profit, limit the definition of what it means to be black. Some tracks rejoice in the beauty of black women, others warn kids about the lucrative offers made by a corrupt rap industry, and all of them advocate self-education and knowledge of self. “K.O.S. (Determination)” in particular is an ode to old-school ideas about self-improvement. What makes it modern though, what moves it on from the collective movements of the Native Tongues, is that they never suggest that knowledge of self (k.o.s.) and determination will improve the community. The focus is squarely on what the individual can improve about himself. It is as though the fantasy of a struggle of collectivities has been abandoned. Mos Def and Talib Kweli, in their focus on the politics of the self, moved Native Tongues philosophy on from an outdated and commercialized politics of multiculturalism.

See also: Queen Latifah, Beastie Boys, Eric B. & Rakim, Kanye West

FURTHER RESOURCES


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Afrika Bambaataa


**A Tribe Called Quest**

*People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm.* Jive, 1990.
*Beats, Rhymes and Life.* Jive, 1996.

**Solo Albums from Members of A Tribe Called Quest**


**Black Sheep**


**De La Soul**

*3 Feet High and Rising.* Tommy Boy, 1989.
*Stakes Is High.* Tommy Boy, 1996.

**The Jungle Brothers**


**Queen Latifah**

*All Hail the Queen.* Tommy Boy, 1989.
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Public Enemy (page 169). Courtesy of Photofest.


Queen Latifah (page 217). Courtesy of Photofest.


De La Soul (page 265), one of the founding members of the Native Tongues posse, along with A Tribe Called Quest, the Jungle Brothers, Afrika Bambaataa, and others. © David Corio.

Ice Cube (page 293). Courtesy of Photofest.

Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg (page 317), 1993. Courtesy of Photofest.


Lil’ Kim (page 439) in the pressroom at the 2006 MTV Video Music Awards in New York. © AP Photo / Tammie Arroyo.

Big Boi and Andre 3000 (page 457) pose in front of the three awards they won at the 46th Annual Grammy Awards, 2004. © AP Photo / Reed Saxon.


Missy Elliot (page 503) performs during the 2003 MTV Europe Music Awards in Edinburgh, Scotland. Courtesy of Photofest.


Kanye West (page 555) performs “Jesus Walks” at the 47th Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, 2005. © AP Photo / Kevork Djansezian.
Preface

Choosing the twenty-four most important hip hop artists of all time is no easy task. From Kool Herc to Kanye West, Icons of Hip Hop spans four decades of MCs and DJs, old-school pioneers and new-school innovators, to profile the figures who have made hip hop music what it is today. Hip hop music, once considered a passing fad, continues to thrive and evolve more than thirty years into its history. Icons of Hip Hop presents the stories of twenty-four important figures who have contributed to the music’s development and success.

Our profiles begin with Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash, two DJs who established hip hop’s musical foundation with their invention of breakbeats and turntable scratching. These hip hop pioneers collected funk and soul records and transformed their record players into instruments that created new sounds through backspinning and scratching. These turntable techniques, along with digital samplers and drum machines, form the backbone of hip hop music. The sounds that DJs like Herc, Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, Pete DJ Jones, and Grandwizard Theodore invented have been built upon by three decades of DJs and producers, from Rick Rubin and Jam Master Jay to Eric B and the Bomb Squad to DJ Premier, DJ Scratch, Dr. Dre, and Kanye West.

At Kool Herc’s block parties in the 1970s, the DJ was the focal point of the performance, and the MC, or rapper, served chiefly to call the crowd’s attention to the DJ and to entice people onto the dance floor. As early MCs like Coke La Rock and Busy Bee began to develop more complex rhyming routines, the MC came into his own. Famous MC battles, such as the 1982 competition between Busy Bee and Kool Moe Dee, took rhyming to a new level as these MCs sought to win over the crowd with their rhyme structure, wordplay, and wit. Whether hyping up the DJ or boasting about his or her own skills on the mic, the MC was always a crowd pleaser. With the 1979 release of Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” the first hip hop record to reach mainstream radio worldwide, the rapper became the face of commercial rap music.
“Rapper’s Delight” also introduced mainstream listeners to the terms rap and hip hop. The song begins with the words, “I said a hip hop...” From that early moment in hip hop history, when rap and hip hop were used in the title and first lines of the same song, the meanings of these two terms have been debated. When many fans and artists talk about hip hop, they explain that it is a culture that expands beyond music to include four central elements: graffiti art (aka tagging or writing), b-boying (aka break dancing, popping, and locking), DJing (aka turntablism, or mixing, cutting, and scratching records), and MCing (aka rapping or rhyming). On his song “9 Elements,” KRS-One expanded this definition to include five more elements: beatboxing, fashion, language, street knowledge, and entrepreneurialism. In his lyrics to “9 Elements,” KRS makes the distinction that to rap is merely an action that anyone can take, but “Hip hop is something you live.” Both terms, hip hop and rap, however, are used to describe music. To distinguish between the two forms, the term hip hop music is often used to designate a song that holds true to hip hop’s original aesthetic rather than appealing to a pop audience, and the term MC, as opposed to rapper, is often used to designate a hip hop vocalist who holds true to this same aesthetic. In an exclusive interview for Icons of Hip Hop, Roxanne Shante explained the difference between MCs and rappers: “Rappers need videos, MCs don’t.”

Although Shante eventually did make a video, she first made her name going head-to-head with other MCs in the street. Her record “Roxanne's Revenge,” hailed as one of hip hop’s first answer records, took rhyme battles into the recording studio as she responded to a single, “Roxanne, Roxanne,” by the group UTFO. Roxanne initiated a series of answer records from several different MCs, and extended hip hop’s competitive element to recordings and radio airplay. Video airplay would become even more important to Run-DMC, whose visual imagery of black fedoras, gold chains, and unlaced Adidas sneakers would introduce hip hop fashion to MTV audiences. As hip hop culture moved into mainstream outlets like MTV, listeners sought to preserve the original culture by making distinctions about which songs counted as “real hip hop” and which were created for crossover success on the pop charts. In the mid-1990s, MC Hammer dropped the “MC” from his name, claiming he was in the business of entertainment rather than hip hop, in response to criticisms that his pop hits like “U Can’t Touch This” were selling out hip hop culture. Debates about what characteristics constitute rap or hip hop rage on today as artists like Defari claim to make “real hip hop” rather than pop rap.

Ideological distinctions aside, however, rap music is an inextricable part of hip hop culture. Artists and listeners will continue to argue about which MCs are making music to make money and which ones do it out of a pure love for hip hop, but even as these debates continue, we should remember that the shiny suits and diamond grills we see on MTV and BET in the twenty-first century are as much a part of hip hop as the Kangol hats and Fila jumpsuits.
worn by hip hoppers in New York City parks in the 1980s. Rather than debating which figures belong to rap and which to hip hop, *Icons of Hip Hop* showcases the inventions and innovations of twenty-four musical icons from 1973 to 2007. Even at two volumes, however, our icon profiles are not comprehensive. As with any collection, there are omissions. Throughout the book, however, we make connections to other MCs, DJs, and producers whose stories intersect with the twenty-four figures we have chosen. Each profile discusses and cross-references other artists connected with the icon at hand. A foreword from Jeru the Damaja, a rapper included in Kool Moe Dee’s list of the top fifty MCs of all time, credits the artists who influenced his rhyme style. Nicole Hodges Persley’s timeline of hip hop history highlights the innovations of artists like Kurtis Blow and Schoolly D, icons who are not included in our twenty-four in-depth profiles. An afterword by veteran rap artist Masta Ace lists the twenty-four most overlooked hip hop icons, who are worthy of further study. Exclusive interviews with Masta Ace, Roxanne Shanté, Mystic, and Kool DJ Red Alert, included in the Roxanne Shanté profile, provide a firsthand account of the development of the first female MC to spark a national trend. And finally, Shamika Ann Mitchell’s exclusive interviews with DJ Premier and DJ Scratch give further attention to producers, the people behind the music, as icons.

The scope of *Icons of Hip Hop* is intentionally broad in that we seek to profile old-school orginators as well as new-school innovators, devote attention to the different regions that have contributed to what hip hop culture has become in the United States, and recover the stories of lesser-known artists. As the editor, I sought to pay homage to those artists, like Ice Cube and Eminem, who typically come to mind when hip hop is mentioned, but also to call attention to groups like the Native Tongues and Eric B. & Rakim, that haven’t matched Ice Cube’s sales but that rank high on many fans’ lists of the best rappers of all time. In short, the twenty-four artists profiled in these two volumes were chosen based on their unique contributions to the development of hip hop music, style, and culture: Grandmaster Flash made the turntables an instrument, Eric B. & Rakim created more complex rhyme flows, MC Lyte proved that women could rap with aggression, Outkast shifted attention to Southern hip hop, and the Native Tongues provided a much-needed critique of hip hop culture itself. Each essay ends with a section on the legacy of the artists, which emphasizes their influence on hip-hop today and their importance to hip hop in the future. We include producers and DJs as well as MCs, fan favorites as well as platinum-selling artists, women as well as men, and Atlanta and Houston as well as New York and Los Angeles. With this approach to selecting its subjects, *Icons of Hip Hop* presents a historical and cultural framework for hip hop that extends to current or emerging artists, unearths the histories of important artists from outside hip hop’s mainstream, and examines the varied and ever-changing forms of the music.
Each of our twenty-four profiles features in-depth coverage of the artist’s life and work, highlighting the artist’s influence in making hip hop music and culture what it is today. The profiles are supported by several sidebars that place the icons within cultural and historical context. The sidebars highlight such issues as hip hop’s homophobia, vegetarian rappers, hip hop and Islam, the mafia, horror films, fashion trends, musical innovations such as turntable scratching and digital sampling, legal issues, and hip hop’s culture of death. There are certain consistent themes to the sidebars, such as regional scenes (Houston, Memphis, and Canada), and hip hop’s intersections with other musical forms (rock, jazz, blues, and metal). Each profile also includes a discography and list of resources for further research. Broad in scope and distinctive in detail, *Icons of Hip Hop* is an excellent resource for the student or casual listener as well as the true hip hop head.

—Mickey Hess
As a member of N.W.A., and then as a solo artist, Ice Cube sat at the forefront of gangsta rap. His lyrical brilliance and affected gangsta identity built the popularity of gangsta rap and West Coast hip hop. Speaking to and for disempowered and disenfranchised youth, Cube used the platform provided by hip hop to blow up, all the while giving voice to what was going on in the hood, from drug dealing and gang banging to police brutality and impoverished, jobless families. Equally important, Cube helped facilitate hip hop’s emergence as a news bureau of sorts, often describing his work as that of
a street reporter. Cube’s career also mirrors hip hop’s history in that Cube has faced significant opposition and condemnation from mainstream America. In fact, Cube, both as a member of N.W.A. and as a solo artist, has been at the center of a significant level of controversy because of his lyrical treatment of police brutality, black-Korean relations, women, and gays and lesbians. Yet even with his career characterized by controversy, Cube has emerged as possibly the most successful artist to cross over to the mainstream, not only as a rapper but as an actor, filmmaker, writer, and television executive. In fact, Cube symbolizes the life span of hip hop, having grown up to a point where he can make family films and television shows for the FX network, even as he continues to produce hip hop albums.

Although one view of Ice Cube’s career sees him leaving behind hip hop for the allure of mainstream acceptance, another perspective sees Cube’s career as a rags-to-riches story in which he uses music to rise out of the same social conditions he describes in his lyrics. The life and times of Cube is a story of hip hop, a complex narrative of inclusion and exclusion, progressive and reactionary agendas, crossover appeal and mainstream demonization, performed identities and keeping it real, and of course the continuity of poverty, despair, and cultural resistance. Hip hop is Ice Cube and Ice Cube is hip hop not just in abstract terms, but in its stories and development as a fundamental American cultural institution.

Born in 1969, O’shea Jackson came into the world in the aftermath of the Watts Riots and amid struggles over community control within South Central Los Angeles and other black communities throughout the nation. Insulated from the streets by his parents, Jackson’s childhood was relatively uneventful. His parents, Hosea (a machinist and groundskeeper at the University of California, Los Angeles) and Doris (a hospital clerk) were loving and dedicated parents, who went to every length to both protect and empower young O’shea, giving him just enough freedom to develop as an independent thinker without sacrificing discipline and safety. His parents were not alone; his older brother, Clyde, who would eventually rename O’shea Ice Cube because of his coolness around girls, served as a protective force in his life: “He was there. He kept me on the right track. You don’t realize that till you see other people who grew up without fathers and how their lives turn out” (McIver 12). Often excluding his mother from such praise while handing most of it to his father and brother, Cube has celebrated the discipline and guidance provided by these men, especially as South Central Los Angeles became more and more violent. The combination of shrinking social services, declining job opportunities, and an increasingly powerful police state during the 1970s resulted in a less than idyllic neighborhood. Gangs and drugs slowly infiltrated South Central, causing an even greater loss of jobs, social services, and police presence. In such an environment, O’shea’s parents did everything to protect him, while still allowing him to be a kid who played football and basketball, and roamed the neighborhood. In fact, his childhood mirrored a typical narrative for American
children, as he explored the spectrum of offerings available to him in South Central Los Angeles, even as increasing levels of violence and shrinking investment in children’s programs limited his play spaces. Yet his parents did not respond to the changes in his community with fear and overprotection. Instead they allowed Cube to explore the streets, contributing to his sense of self and community, something that would motivate him for years to come. Ice Cube’s childhood established an important foundation for his music career, instilling in him an immense amount of confidence and respect for family and school (although he would often eschew these values in his lyrics).

Ice Cube’s career took him from novice high school rapper to controversial cultural figure, to hip hop icon, to major Hollywood player. No matter the project before him, Cube manages to express his social consciousness in his art; family, friends, the hood, racism, misogyny, police brutality, and education all, at different times and with varying degrees of potency, take center stage in Ice Cube’s productions. After Cube completed grammar school, the Jackson family faced the difficult decision of where he would attend middle school. Violence and shrinking funds in Los Angeles public schools created uncertainty in the family. After learning that Randy, Cube’s best friend, would be attending Hawthorne Christian School, which was located in the Valley some twenty miles east of downtown Los Angeles, the Jacksons decided to reunite the boys at Hawthorne. While crucial in Cube’s own persona and artistic development, the experience was certainly not a positive one. Besides the lengthy commute that many black children experienced with busing, Cube’s educational experience thrust him into an environment of gang rivalries. It exposed him to increased violence and stress, as his classmates included Bloods and Crips from rival gangs, brought to the same schools through busing. The experience taught Cube a lot about American race relations and how busing sought to bring together black and white students but did so without regard for the safety, educational development, and personal well-being of the students, particularly the black students. It also dramatically impacted Cube in terms of his interest in school, given the lack of respect afforded to students within this chaotic environment. The violence, the lessons about race, and his experience crossing borders and seeing other parts of Los Angeles all had a profound effect on Cube’s outlook and philosophies, some of which can be seen in his lyrics. The experience turned Cube off school, and his parents removed him from Hawthorne, choosing to enroll him at William Howard Taft High School, located in Woodland Hills, a place where he would discover his passion for music alongside a revitalized focus on school and education.

ICE CUBE AND THE EMERGENCE OF WEST COAST GANGSTA RAP

As he entered Taft, Ice Cube was listening to everything from “Rapper’s Delight” to Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message,” the music of Afrika
Bambaataa, Kurtis Blow, Run-DMC, DJ Kool Herc, and so many other East Coast rappers. Rap was emerging as a voice for the underclass. Serving as vehicle of empowerment and communal bonding, hip hop became a form of cultural resistance and empowerment for black youth throughout the United States. Inspired by the music and his burgeoning friendships with several classmates at Taft, Cube would find his voice in hip hop. In 1983, Cube penned his first rhyme during a typing class. Discussing the newest cuts from Run-DMC, his classmate Kiddo challenged Cube to an impromptu battle of their own. As they each sat down to write their own lyrics, to settle once and for all who could pen the dopest rhymes, Cube transformed himself from a listener of hip hop, someone who found voice and empowerment in the artistry of others, to a practitioner, an artist who used rap to illuminate, educate, pontificate, and of course give voice to his and his friends’ anger, dreams, and frustrations.

Although he hadn’t yet developed the rhyme skills for which he would become known, Cube remained focused on developing his game. After hearing the outcome of Cube’s battle with Kiddo, Tony Wheatcob, a Taft classmate who, as Sir Jinx, would become a successful rap producer, proposed a collaboration. Cube and Jinx put a tape together in Jinx’s garage, and throughout high school they would continue to write and perform their music, all the while developing their hip hop skills (Chang 299).

By 1986, a hip hop scene had emerged on the West Coast, and once again Jinx would play an instrumental role in Cube’s development. He introduced Cube to his cousin, a young man from South Central named Andre Young, who was performer and producer with World Class Wreckin’ Cru, an up-and-coming hip hop group in the LA scene. Upon their introduction, Cube and Andre, aka Dr. Dre, began hanging together (Chang 300). After Dre heard one of Cube’s raps, he invited him on a shopping trip. He also introduced Cube to his party scene, inviting him to the numerous parties he gave at a local roller rink. One night Dre alerted Cube that he and Jinx should prepare to perform at the next roller rink party. This was just the break they needed: Cube and Jinx found the right mix of comedy, serious lyrical content, and cussing to reach the audience, building on this singular party to a blossoming place in Los Angeles’s hip hop scene.

In addition to hanging with Dre and performing at his parties, Cube formed his own group at Taft—the Stereo Crew. Selling over fifty tapes and known throughout the community, Stereo Crew put Cube on the local hip hop map. Their songs “Getting Sweated” and “She’s a Skag,” were both relatively popular among high school kids in the area. However, Stereo Crew would not last. After their breakup, Cube would join forces with Sir Jinx and Kid Disaster to form CIA—Cru in Action. Although still in high school, CIA possessed quite a following, even releasing a Dre-produced single on vinyl, which contained several notable songs: “My Posse,” “Just 4 the cash $,” and “Ill-legal.”
Simultaneous to Cube’s rise within the local hip hop scene, a young drug dealer and entrepreneur who went by the name of Eazy-E emerged on the scene in Compton, California. In 1986, their paths would cross, after Dre asked Eazy-E, whom he had met previously, for a $900 loan to post bail (he had been arrested because of a series of unpaid traffic violations). Eazy agreed to give Dre the money if he agreed to produce for a label he was developing, one he would call Ruthless Records. Even though their working relationship grew out of necessity, it quickly blossomed, with Eazy-E providing Dre with unlimited support and near autonomy. Dre would soon discover HBO (Home Boys Only), a New York–based rap group whose skill impressed Eazy and Dre enough to offer them a record deal. Unfortunately, neither HBO nor Dre and Eazy-E had writing skills, making the production of a single difficult. Dre suggested that Ice Cube’s lyrics could deliver a hit for HBO, and authored “Boyz N the Hood,” a song about violence and gang life in American ghettos. The members of HBO did not see its merits, but Cube, Dre, and Eazy all loved it. When HBO refused to record the song, they severed ties with Ruthless Records and left Eazy-E in a difficult position: a song, but no artist; studio time paid for but no one to record. Desperate, given the potentially damaging financial effects of not using the studio time, Dre offered another solution: Eazy, despite being a rap novice, should record the song himself, being the truest embodiment of a boy from the hood. After much persuading from both Cube and Dre, Eazy relented, agreeing to record “Boyz.” Cube, Eazy, and Dre initially sold the single out of the trunks of their cars until Macola Records, who released the single, agreed to distribute it as well. The popularity of the song convinced Eazy-E to request additional songs from Ice Cube, who delivered “8-Ball,” a track on Old English 800 malt liquor, and “Dopeman,” a tale about a neighborhood crack dealer.

**N.W.A. IS BORN**

Although Cube, Dre, and Eazy were each committed to their own groups, the success of “Boyz,” coupled with some difficulties each were facing (both Dre and Cube felt somewhat exploited by Lonzo Williams, the producer for both World Class Wreckin’ Cru and CIA), made them think about forming a new group. As they came together to record these new songs, they were now joined by MC Ren, DJ Yella, Arabian Prince, and the D.O.C., all friends of Cube and Dre, resulting in the formation of N.W.A.—Niggaz with Attitude. This lineup lasted until 1988, when Arabian Prince and The D.O.C. went solo, leaving the group with its now-classic five-man lineup of Dre, Ice Cube, MC Ren, Eazy-E, and DJ Yella. Cube would later recount the unceremonious founding of N.W.A. and the process of naming the group in the following way: Traveling to the studio, Eazy and Dre informed Cube that the time had come to officially form their own group, leaving behind their various other
projects. Wondering what to call themselves, Dre and Eazy came up with a name that would capture the essence of their identity and music: Niggaz with Attitude. And just like that, N.W.A. began, West Coast rap had arrived, and Cube and the rest of the group would forever change the landscape of hip hop, the music industry, and America’s cultural terrain.

After his initial success in the rap game, Ice Cube would continue his education, graduating from Taft and then heading to college. His wandering mind—which tended to fixate on his own music and had greater interest in the histories of Public Enemy, Grandmaster Flash, and LL Cool J than those offered in class—impacted his studies. Hosea Jackson, however, cared little for his son’s emerging music career, offering a stern hand and significant discipline as to his educational focus. In “Doin Dumb Shit,” Cube would later rap about his lack of focus and his teenage difficulties, again crediting his father with keeping him on track. He told listeners that while he almost did not graduate, he ultimately decided to “fuck the dumb shit, cause pops’ll fuck me real good.” Because of his parents’ disciplinary approach and emphasis on education, Cube not only graduated high school but went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in architectural drafting at age twenty-one. Cube often praises his parents for instilling this passion for learning and teaching, a love and life’s work that is evident with his determination in school and with his artistry (McIver 39–40).

In fact, Cube attributes both his perseverance with music and his respect for education to his parents. In 1987, despite the immense success of “Boyz” and an N.W.A. summer tour, Cube decided to take a break from N.W.A. so that he could attend the Phoenix Institute of Technology in Arizona, where he studied architectural drafting and design. Cube realized that nothing was guaranteed within the music industry, especially for a hip hop artist from South Central Los Angeles, a fact his parents emphasized over and over again. Given the media backlash against hip hop and constant wondering when the bubble would burst just as it had for disco, Cube agreed, feeling it was unlikely that he could make a career with music. After a year, Cube had successfully completed the program, receiving a degree in architectural drafting and design, which was perfect timing given the emerging success of N.W.A.

During that year at school, on vacations in California, Eazy had contacted Cube in hopes that he would write the lyrics for several songs that would appear on E’s debut album, Eazy-Duz-It, which ultimately proved to be a tremendous commercial success. Although a solo album, the success of Eazy-Duz-It not only elevated the place of West Coast hip hop, putting Eazy and the other members of the N.W.A. on a national map, but demonstrated the market potential of N.W.A. In summer 1988, after returning from Arizona, Cube wrote “A Bitch Is a Bitch,” which would become the fourth single released by N.W.A. Controversial to say the least, “A Bitch Is a Bitch” defended male descriptions of women as bitches. The success of this song in the
clubs and the surrounding controversy convinced Macola Records that the
time was ripe to release N.W.A.’s first album: *N.W.A. and the Posse*. The
album, which featured “Boyz N the Hood,” “8 Ball,” “Dopeman,” “A Bitch
Is a Bitch,” and several other tracks, was relatively successful as a club album,
particularly within black clubs on the West Coast, yet the lack of radio play
due to its language (*niggas* and *bitches*) and fears about its promotion of
violence limited its success nationally.

Through 1988, N.W.A. continued to grow, leading Ice Cube to focus more
attention on a career in hip hop. Joined by MC Ren during that year, N.W.A.
was ready to take the hip hop world by storm with the release of its second
album, *Straight Outta Compton*. Changing the face of hip hop and American
music in general, *Straight Outta Compton* marked the arrival of West Coast
hip hop, gangsta rap, N.W.A., and Ice Cube on the American cultural land-
cscape. Within three months of release, *Straight Outta Compton* had gone
triple platinum, a feat rarely achieved by any artist, ultimately selling over
3 million copies. Its effect on the music industry was not limited to its finan-
cial success in that it served as evidence of the long-term profitability of hip
hop. Moreover, more than any other album, it brought hard-core gangsta rap
with an overtly political message into the American mainstream.

The image and agenda of the album is set in the first moments of the title
track, in which Ice Cube announces that he is a “crazy motherfucker” with a
“sawed off,” making it clear that N.W.A.’s music would bring listeners into
America’s most dangerous ghetto, a place defined by Uzi-packing gangstas,
bratalizing cops, the dopeman, violence, and other unseemly realities that
American culture tended to ignore, deny, and pathologize. It in turn offered
a counternarrative to the dominant representations and discourse, from that
of the news media to the reports of politicians like Daniel Patrick Moynihan;
it chronicled the good, the bad, and the ugly, as any street reporter would do.
In songs like “Straight Outta Compton,” and “Gangsta Gangsta,” N.W.A.
sought to force America to deal with or reconcile its immense problems and
reflect on its contradictions. Ice Cube described the album as an attempt to
give voice to the streets, to explain the basis of communal anger (McIver 53).
Through Cube’s powerful lyrics, N.W.A. would introduce America to pov-
ty, drive-bys, drug dealing, police brutality, and sadness; since most
Americans feared places like Compton and made judgments without seeing,
N.W.A. forced them to look and listen through their airwaves. No song
embodied their desire to give voice to the underclass and its anger better than
“Fuck tha Police.”

Chronicling the brutality and daily occurrence of police abuse, “Fuck tha
Police” documents the sordid and racist history of the LAPD and the daily
experience of brutality faced by black youth. Cube tells listeners that “young
nigga got it bad ‘cause I’m brown,” yet the song provides ample specifics: black
cops being just as guilty as white cops in terms of brutalizing black youth; the
ubiquity of racial profiling, and the daily police searches that resulted from
black youths fitting the stereotype of a drug dealer or a criminal, and even the occurrence of police murders. While common and accepted knowledge within much of the black community, such criticism and condemnations of police officers, admired and revered in much of America, prompted a powerful backlash. Police officers throughout the country refused to work at N.W.A. concerts, while the FBI sent a letter to the members of N.W.A. condemning the song for its promotion of violence and overall disrespect for both the rule of law and law enforcement officials. Not surprisingly, Cube scoffed at such criticism, making clear that it was the police who were guilty of disrespect and promoting violence within the black community. Although Eazy-E tended to brush off these criticisms with claims that the group and its fans didn’t care if the album or any of its songs offended the police or the FBI, Ice Cube defended his lyrics and their music by invoking the truthfulness and authenticity of experience behind the music. If their music offended people, it was not the fault of N.W.A., since the words merely described the reality of their world. Such a defense wasn’t limited to the outcry over “Fuck tha Police,” but extended to criticisms that N.W.A glorified gangsta violence and promoted misogyny and homophobia. For example, through the media and in a published conversation with bell hooks, a black feminist cultural critic, Cube questioned the basis of accusations of misogyny, claiming that his use of the term *bitch* did not describe all women but those scandalous and devious women whom he had met during his lifetime. Yet Cube also recognized then and most certainly in later interviews that the lyrical description of women and gays and lesbians reflected where he, and N.W.A., were when he was nineteen years old.

*Straight Outta Compton* left a lasting mark on the American cultural landscape, shifting the balance of power in hip hop from the East Coast to the West Coast and bringing the ghettos of a post–civil rights America and the stories of its gangsta residents to white suburban America. This success and popularity reflected the power and brilliance of Cube’s lyrics as well as the phatness in N.W.A.’s beats; moreover, it showed the pleasure derived from their lurid stories of murder, mayhem, violence, and brutality. Most significantly, the success of N.W.A. with *Straight Outta Compton* reflected the dialectics of their marketing strategy, one that emphasized the truthfulness and authenticity of their music and those popular discourses that reduced blackness, particularly young black males, to images of criminals, deviants, drug dealers, and murderers. In other words, the power of Cube’s lyrics and of course Cube himself with his perpetual scowl and endless swearing reflected their realness, a fact emphasized by N.W.A. and embraced by listeners.

**GOING SOLO**

In 1989, as Ice Cube and N.W.A. went on tour, Cube’s commitment to the group began to wane. During that summer, he began a friendship with
Pat Charbonet, a publicist with Priority Records. During one of their many conversations about N.W.A.’s future and the endless possibilities for the group, Charbonet asked Cube how royalty payments were split between the group members and their manager, Jerry Heller.

Unable to answer these questions and concerned where the money was going, Cube requested a meeting of the band to discuss finances, especially any arrangements between Heller and Eazy-E that gave a larger percentage to Eazy. At the meeting, Heller, whom Eazy advised to attend, offered each member a new contract along with a $75,000 signing bonus. Everyone but Ice Cube signed that day; Cube, already skeptical, told Heller and Eazy that he wanted to consult a lawyer. After meeting with both a lawyer and an accountant, Cube was advised never to sign the contract for a number of reasons, all of which demonstrate the lack of fair compensation in the deal: The Straight Outta Compton tour had grossed $650,000, of which $130,000 went to Heller and only $23,000 went to Cube. Although he had written half the tracks on Straight Outta Compton, he was only paid $32,000 for his work on the album. The terms of the new contract offered Cube a large cash bonus up front, yet still mimicked these past arrangements for royalties, which in Cube’s estimation was neither fair nor equitable.

In addition to the royalty structures, the contract established a relationship between Cube and Ruthless Records but made no mention of Cube being a full member of N.W.A. To Cube, there was little choice but to leave the group (he would later sue Heller and settle the case out of court). Although Cube faced some teasing from other members of N.W.A., who questioned his sanity for turning down $75,000 and made jokes about how he wanted to go solo like the Arabian Prince (whose career had not been successful), he left N.W.A. on relatively good terms. In fact, immediately after his departure, he contacted Yella, Dre, and the others about working with him on his solo album, all of whom declined because they were busy working on Eazy’s second album. In the end, this was a blessing in disguise, resulting in Cube’s teaming up with the Bomb Squad, an East Coast group who had worked with Public Enemy, and the Da Lench Mob, a group from Southern California, to produce his debut album. His decision to produce the album in New York and join forces with an East Coast crew opened up many opportunities for Cube, neutralizing some of the disrespect that many West Coast artists faced from those on the East side.

AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted was released on May 16, 1990, to much fanfare and critical acclaim. The genius of AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted rests not just with Cube’s ability to give voice to America’s underclass and offer counternarratives, political commentaries, and powerful stories, but through the introspection, self-reflection, and his ability to provide listeners with multiple perspectives, some of which illustrated his own contradictions and shortcomings. For example, in “You Can’t Fade Me,” Cube tells how he got a girl pregnant; scared, he wonders if he should give her the money or abort the
baby with a “kick to the tummy.” He neither endorses nor rationalizes sentiments, using the song to question and problematize his own thoughts. Yet the power of Cube’s lyrics exists in the next line, where he demonizes the consequences of domestic violence. Notwithstanding this newfound self-awareness, the misogyny evident during the N.W.A. years was on full display with “Get Off My Dick and Tell Yo Bitch to Come Here.” Yet, with this album he offers something more with “It’s a Man’s World,” a duet with his cousin Yo Yo (Yolanda Whitaker) in which she chastises Cube for his misogynist and sexist views of women. Still, Cube’s focus on state violence, on the effects of police brutality within his community, mass incarceration, and poverty remained his trademark. In “Endangered Species,” he laments the lack of concern for police brutality and cop killings, noting the absence of justice within America’s ghettos. To him, the police exist “to serve, protect and break a nigga’s neck.” The consistency of Cube’s anti-police brutality stance and his efforts to give voice to the underclass alongside the album’s complexity and self-reflection embodies the greatness of AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted. Spin magazine called the album a masterpiece, and The Source awarded it the much-coveted five microphone rating. Despite limited radio play, the album spent several weeks on the Top 20 Billboard charts. Its success and his formation of Street Knowledge Productions (with Pat Charbonet) seemed to indicate that Cube had successfully left N.W.A. behind, moving on to a solo career without the proverbial public spats, yet it would be clear that his ties to N.W.A. would be difficult to sever.

In November 1990, members of N.W.A. appeared on Pump It Up, a hip hop TV show hosted by Dee Barnes, to promote their new album, 100 Miles and Runnin’. During the course of the interview, its members disissed Cube, dismissing questions as to whether they would miss him. Shortly thereafter, Cube appeared on the show, offering similar insults and disparaging commentary about N.W.A. Worse, the producers of the show decided to edit the two interviews to create a single package that would overemphasize the battle and the mutual dislike between Cube and NWA. Despite the warning by Barnes that it was not a good idea, the producers went ahead with its airing, adding fuel to a smoldering fire with close-up shots of Yella crushing an ice cube with his shoes juxtaposed with Cube mocking the title of their new album as evidence of their failure, their lack of manhood, and fear of Cube: In his absence, they were 100 miles away and running. Their appearance on Pump It Up resulted in significant media coverage, especially following Dre’s assault of Barnes and a more public battle between Cube and members of N.W.A., particularly Eazy-E. Still, Cube paid little mind to his former bandmates, focusing on his own personal and professional development, both of which became evident with the release of Death Certificate.

For Ice Cube, 1990 was a year of transition: from posse member to solo artist, from apprentice to master and mentor, from lyricist to artist and producer, from vocal misogynist to an individual with more enlightened views.
toward women. Amid these transitions and transformations, Cube also found greater knowledge regarding history and politics, much of which came as a result of his introduction to the Nation of Islam. His exposure to the teachings of Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, and Louis Farrakhan inspired not only personal reflection but education and consciousness-raising efforts within Cube. In fact, he began to read about black history and the writings of black nationalist thinkers, which had a tremendous influence on him. He began to question his own motives and almost obsession with making money, fame, and partying, challenging himself to refocus and use his artistry and platform for a greater good. The emphasis of Black Nationalism, the formation of a separate Black Nation, spiritual rejuvenation, reparations, and community control within the Nation of Islam resonated with Cube. Although he never officially joined the NOI, partly out of fear of how membership would affect listener perceptions and also because of ideological and political differences, his conversations with Louis Farrakhan and other ministers from the NOI as well as his investment in his spiritual development manifested in his artistry, maybe most evident with *Death Certificate*.

Released October 29, 1991, Cube’s second solo album brought him together with Da Lench Mob and his old pal Jinx. Seizing the momentum of *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted* and the press from *Boyz N the Hood*, *Death Certificate* was an immediate success. It entered the Billboard charts at number two and would eventually go platinum, an amazing feat given its overly political tone and the limited investment Priority Records had made in promoting the album. *Death Certificate*, which attempted to intervene in the state of emergency facing black America, was divided between the death side, a mirror of the horrors of inner-city life, and the life side, “a vision of where we need to go.” Challenging the fetishizing of gangsta life and the sensationalism that often surrounded the representations of inner-city life—which he was certainly guilty of—*Death Certificate* speaks to the political and artistic maturation of Ice Cube. The album even included several spoken-word pieces serving as interludes, most of which were inspired by the words of the NOI ministers. The influence of the NOI and Cube’s more radical politics are visible throughout the album, with tracks like “The Wrong Nigga to Fuck With,” “I Wanna Kill Sam,” “True to the Game,” and “Steady Mobbin’.”

Unfortunately, the message of these songs and the power of the album would be subsumed by the controversy surrounding “Black Korea” and “No Vaseline.” Although only a forty-five-second track, “Black Korea” sparked immense controversy. It chronicles the treatment he and others within the black community face from Korean shopkeepers, who, he states, view all African Americans as potential criminals who deserve little respect and tremendous suspicion. The effort to bring this issue into public consciousness was challenging enough, but promises of retribution with threats of violence and arson if they didn’t “pay respect to the black fist” elicited outrage.
Interestingly and more revealingly, it was “No Vaseline” that prompted the largest controversy and backlash. “No Vaseline” offers a response to N.W.A.’s dissing of Cube, which included his being called a Benedict Arnold in *Efil4zaggin*. The song begins with a challenge to N.W.A.’s hardness and even their blackness, noting how they moved “straight outta Compton” and had lost their edge, having appeared in an R&B/pop music video (Michel’le), certainly not a sign of being a Nigga with an attitude. Cube also uses the song to accuse N.W.A. of turning its back on the black community, calling Eazy-E out for attending a Republican fund-raiser. Worse, Cube dedicates much of the song to blasting Jerry Heller, who he says is screwing the group out of its money. The song takes aim not only at Heller but at the illegitimacy of N.W.A. as a hip hop group with a white male pulling the strings. Ice Cube points out the irony of calling your group Niggaz Wit Attitude while having “a white Jew tellin’ ya what to do.”

The accusations of homophobia and anti-Semitism that resulted from the release of “No Vaseline,” combined with the controversy concerning “Black Korea,” had a considerable impact on Ice Cube and the reception of *Death Certificate*. The backlash wasn’t limited to the press. The anti-gang group Guardian Angels, who compared Cube to David Duke, unsuccessfully pressured MTV to ban Ice Cube videos from its rotation. The Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference called for a ban of sales from retailers. Camelot Music store did ban sales of *Death Certificate*, while Oregon passed a law making it illegal to display Ice Cube’s image inside its stores. In the United Kingdom, Island Records (Priority’s UK distributor) removed both “No Vaseline” and “Black Korea” from its version of the album. St. Ides also dropped Cube from its ad campaign for its malt liquor. (see sidebar: St. Ides).

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**St. Ides**
David J. Leonard

Attempting to capitalize on the popularity of hip hop and its connection to malt liquor, solidified by N.W.A.’s “8-Ball” and numerous rap videos that showed artists sipping their favorite brew, St. Ides hired Ice Cube as one of its spokespeople in the late 1980s. Joining King Tee, the Geto Boys, EPMD, Snoop, and Nate Dogg, Cube did not merely endorse Ides by appearing in commercials but helped produce several songs that would be used throughout the campaign. The most notorious or infamous of these songs and videos had Cube rhyming St. Ides malt liquor with “Get your girl in the mood quicker.” With such lyrics, along with the controversy surrounding the release of *Death Certificate*, Ice Cube and St. Ides faced massive public criticisms for the ad campaign. The U.S. Surgeon General and the New York State Consumer Protection Commission publicly criticized the commercials. The U.S.
Although accusations of racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia would stick with Ice Cube for several years, these media scandals propelled sales of *Death Certificate*, and boosted Cube’s fanbase in the mainstream. In summer 1992, Perry Farrell asked Ice Cube to join his Lollapalooza Tour. The annual tour was primarily a showcase for alternative rock bands, but had featured Ice T and his heavy metal band Body Count in its inaugural 1991 tour. In 1992, Cube played the main stage along with rock bands Ministry, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Soundarden, and Pearl Jam. While Lollapalooza allowed him some on-stage posturing (he had members of his posse hold fake guns through the set), he also made light of his gangsta image by using a water gun to cool off the crowd. It had been a long six months for Cube, given the immense backlash spawned by the release of *Death Certificate* and the media pressures that surrounded his music and cinematic careers, yet the success of the album and his increasingly evident crossover appeal marked the beginnings of Cube’s surge within popular culture.

On April 29, 1992, Los Angeles erupted into riots following the acquittals of Lawrence Powell, Timothy Wind, Theodore Brisenio, and Stacey Koon, whose videotaped beating of Rodney King brought the issue of police brutality into the national consciousness just as Cube’s previous album had done on a smaller scale. Both these events, along with the criticism he faced with *Death Certificate* and the shooting of Latasha Harlins impacted Cube in the long term, and in the short run with the release of *The Predator* (see sidebar: Hip Hop and the LA Uprising).

Released November 17, 1992, *The Predator* illustrates Cube’s array of talent, demonstrating to the world that he was as much a political orator and social commentator as he was a rapper and an actor. Commercially, *The Predator* was a tremendous success. It was the first hip hop album to enter the
Hip Hop and the LA Uprising

David J. Leonard

The 1991 Los Angeles uprising, not surprisingly, had a dramatic effect on West Coast hip hop. As a music that sought to elucidate the happenings within America’s inner cities and give voice to the black underclass, the fact that South Central Los Angeles was on fire, and that its black and brown residents were affected, would alter the direction and reception of hip hop.

Before the fires were even put out, media critics and politicians had already blamed hip hop for the lawlessness, the violence, and even the riot itself. Ice Cube took the brunt of this criticism, having rapped about a potential riot in “Black Korea.” Additionally, songs on The Predator explored the anger over the beatings of Rodney King, leading some to claim that he was causing anger within the black community. Cube saw things otherwise, claiming that he merely expressed the sentiments of blacks in South Central Los Angeles prior to the riots. Had white America been listening to his music, he argued, it could have seen the uprising coming long before the verdicts. Not buying his claims about having the pulse of LA’s underclass, media and politicians continued to blame hip hop for inciting the riots.

Cube, and others, responded not just to these critics but to the riots themselves just as you would expect: through their lyrics. Leaving behind the commonplace gangsta fairy tales of early 1990s gangsta rap (at least for a few months), the post-riot landscape saw extensive commentary on the Los Angeles uprising. In addition to “We Had to Tear This Motherfucker Up,” Cube used The Predator to explain what happened on April 29, 1992, including several news-like interludes and even more references in various songs. Likewise, he collaborated with Kam in the production of “Get the First,” a single released by Mercury Records to raise money for the Brotherhood Movement, an organization that was working to rebuild South Central Los Angeles. Similarly, Paris and Public Enemy each released albums that commented on the LA uprising, making clear that amid the political blame game, conversations about how to rebuild, and the ubiquitous questions about why LA happened, hip hop had some answers; some that white America might not want to hear but would have little choice given the popularity of artists like Ice Cube.

Billboard charts at number one; it would eventually secure this spot on the R&B charts as well, a feat that had last been done by Stevie Wonder, when Songs in the Key of Life topped both charts more than fifteen years before. The commercial success of the album did not merely reflect Cube’s popularity, his ability to tap into the predominant questions of the day while capturing the anger of many (black) Americans, but elucidated the aesthetic and sound quality available on The Predator. Abandoning the bass-dominated
traditions of gangsta rap, Cube blended together the sounds of funk, psychodelic, and soul with the traditional sounds of hip hop. The Los Angeles uprising not only marked a shift toward even more political and social commentary with hip hop, which certainly was evident with The Predator, but a change to the sound as well, one that would guide the maturation of hip hop for several years to come.

The foundation song for The Predator, one that captures the political and aesthetic qualities or ethos of the album and its time was “We Had to Tear This Motherfucker Up.” It chronicles the trial of the four LAPD officers and its aftermath, making clear as to why “we” (literally and lyrically) had to tear “this motherfucker up.” Powerful in itself, juxtaposed with “It Was a Good Day,” a song that imagines a perfect day in South Central, Cube offers immense insight into the despair felt by many African Africans. Sampling the Isley Brothers’ “Footsteps in the Dark” and the Morent’s “Come on Sexy Mama,” two soulful R&B songs that enhance Cube’s lyrics and style, “It Was a Good Day” offers a perfect counter to the anger and frustration in “We Had to Tear This Motherfucker Up.” On this (good) day, as opposed to April 29, 1992, everything goes right: Cube’s narrator eats a perfect breakfast, balls at the court with the fellas, has sex with his girlfriend, and chills with his homies. Most important, there is no death, no murder, and no cops (“No helicopters looking for murder”). Yet Cube makes clear that this dream is almost laughable, concluding the song by asking what he was thinking, transitioning into “We Had to Tear This Motherfucker Up.” Like the metaphor of life and death offered with Death Certificate, these two songs capture the essence of The Predator: anger and hope; despair and possibility. The Predator seemed to be the culmination of Ice Cube’s development as a solo artist. It was less controversial than his earlier solo albums, but just as socially relevant.

Ice Cube released his follow-up album, Lethal Injection, on July 12, 1993. Concerned about talk of his selling out and losing his gangsta roots, Cube sought to create an album that highlighted his G-funk style, his newfound mainstream style, and of course his well-known gangsta political commentary. For example, “You Know How We Do It,” a commentary on the East Coast–West Coast feud within hip hop shows Cube’s talent for in-the-moment political and cultural commentary. “Down 4 Whatever” also makes clear that Cube is hip hop as he battles K-Dee in an old-school microphone battle session, in which he announces his preparedness to make records and revolution. “Ghetto Bird” is a classic Cube cut, which continues his effort to give voice to the experiences of the black underclass and their daily reality with police violence. To him, this was embodied by his return to underground street hip hop, with hard-core themes of police brutality, militarization, surveillance (ghetto birds = helicopters), and state violence. He graphically describes the sights and sounds of ghetto birds patrolling the night, rapping, “They make the neighborhood seem like Saigon.” Although each of these songs shows a return to his hard-core roots, “Cave Bitch” follows suit, almost
serving as the ultimate piece of evidence that he hasn’t sold out. Here he raps about white women and black men, more specifically how marrying blonde white women had become a status symbol for black male celebrities. Cube sought to demonstrate this outside the mainstream in hip hop, while illustrating the varied reactions of critics to his description of white women and black women as bitches. Critics who had made little of his description of black women as bitches denounced him in this case. However, “Cave Bitch” would be Cube’s last blatantly misogynistic song.

The album was not a total reversal of styles, as Cube remained true to his more mainstream sound as well. With “Bop Gun,” an eleven-minute epic with a contribution from George Clinton, Cube replicates the funky sound of previous albums. Cube also uses this album to focus on love, dispelling the criticism that he and hip hop were nothing but anger. To him, the album represents a lethal injection of truth (the mirror into society and self) and love (McIver 136). Reconciling street cred with marketability, Lethal Injection is yet another example of how Cube in particular, and conscious artists in general, attempt to work the system to both get their message out and avoid falling by the mainstream’s wayside. Lackluster reception by critics is only one characteristic of an artist’s competency; an artist’s intentions are equally important, as Cube’s career in Hollywood can attest.

A NEW BEGINNING

The 1993 release of Lethal Injection would mark the beginning of Ice Cube’s five-year hiatus from making solo albums. During this period, he would produce and supply the lyrics for several albums, including Kam’s Never Again and Da Lench Mob’s Guerillas in the Mist. He additionally collaborated on several projects, joining Mack 10 and WC to form the Westside Connection, which recorded the immensely popular single “Bow Down.” He also contributed to the soundtracks from Dangerous Minds (“The World Is Mine”) and I Got the Hook Up (“Ghetto Vet”) and joined with Snoop Dogg and Mack 10 to produce “Only in California.” He also released Bootlegs and B-Sides (1994), a compilation of innovative remixes of some of his most popular songs, and Featuring... Ice Cube, a collection of his collaborative projects, and participated in the 1998 Family Values Tour with Korn and Limp Bizkit. Yet for all intents and purposes, his solo rap career had come to a standstill. The early and mid-1990s saw Ice Cube’s focus turning away from hip hop music to an emerging ghettocentric imagination within Hollywood. Whereas rap music proved to be one of the strongest genres of expression for the black underclass during the 1970s and 1980s (as well as one of the few opportunities to make it big in the entertainment industry), Hollywood, which sought to capitalize on the popularity of N.W.A., Public Enemy, and Run-DMC, emerged as a powerful space for hip hop during the 1990s. Cube,
perhaps more than any others, would use these opportunities to propel his own career.

Ice Cube would release two more albums—War and Peace Vol. 1 (The War Disc) (1998) and War and Peace Vol. 2 (The Peace Disc) (2000), both sophisticated examinations of war, peace, violence, calm, death, and life. Because Cube had lost his fan base to a certain degree and was seen now, both albums were unable to match the success of the early 1990s. Moreover, the world of hip hop had changed, with bling, sex, parties, and excess being predominant themes of hip hop at the turn of the century—a change Cube was unwilling to accept. Cube claimed that the changes in hip hop reflected an obsession with fame and money making and an absence of consciousness raising and communal empowerment. His focus on movies resulted from hip hop losing its way within the mainstream; to him, there was no place in hip hop for a voice of politics and opposition. Although Cube’s own growth as an artist and hip hop’s changes certainly pushed him into virtual retirement, it was his success in Hollywood that facilitated his transformation from rapper to actor.

WELCOME TO HOLLYWOOD

Ice Cube’s acting career began as a natural extension of his place in hip hop, as Hollywood merely sought to capitalize on the popularity and authenticity of hip hop artists to sell its projects. In 1988, John Singleton, then a junior majoring in film writing at the University of Southern California, approached Cube, telling him that he was developing a script that documented the experience of black youth in South Central Los Angeles; he hoped Cube would act in the film. Cube did not hear from Singleton again until 1990, when he asked Cube if he wanted to read for the part of Doughboy, the character Singleton had written with him in mind. Despite Singleton’s immense confidence and determination to cast him in Boyz N the Hood, Cube’s transition to acting was neither easy nor natural. His first reading was a disaster, leading Singleton to inquire if Cube had read the entire script. Learning that he had only read his part, Singleton sent him home, asking him to return several days later and only after he had read the entire script, at which time he was offered a role in the film.

Cube plays Doughboy, partly a stereotype of young black males—angry, violent, hypersexual, criminally minded, lazy—and otherwise a complex, innovative character. Cube’s performance gives Doughboy depth, complexity, and humanity. He masterfully plays a foil to Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and Ricky (Morris Chestnut), both of whom seek to transcend the limitations of inner-city life. Likewise, Doughboy contributes to Singleton’s overarching argument about black fathers and parents in general, as they relate to black pathology. Without a father in his life, as opposed to Tre, who benefits from
the wisdom of his father (played by Lawrence Fishburne), Doughboy falls into a life of criminality and degradation that ultimately leads to his own death. Besides mirroring his ideology as it relates to the importance of black fathers as protectors and educators, Cube’s contribution to Boyz transcended his bringing Doughboy to life: He wrote and recorded the film’s soundtrack; he gave legitimacy to the film’s message and tone given his South Central roots; and his popularity and connection to hip hop contributed to the media buzz and the film’s immense box office success. Still, Boyz and Singleton’s faith in Cube did a lot for his career, further elevating him into the mainstream. Up to this point, his popularity had been very much connected to his place in N.W.A., his celebrity within black youth culture, and his voice and lyrical genius, yet following the release of Boyz N the Hood his face and artistry entered the national consciousness. While enhancing his rap career, the success and critical acclaim that came with Boyz N the Hood provided additional opportunities for Ice Cube within Hollywood, next with the production of Trespass.

Released on Christmas Day 1992, Trespass sought to capitalize on the success of Boyz N the Hood, New Jack City, and Menace to Society, as well as the popularity of hip hop, casting Ice Cube alongside Ice-T. While the film received mixed reviews, some of which criticized its deployment of racial stereotypes (white heroes versus black villains/criminals), Cube’s performance was universally praised. Just as with Boyz, reviewers praised his ability to bring complexity and depth to an otherwise stock and racially flat character. Moreover, the reviewers tended to offer praise for Cube’s growth as an actor, marking his entry into Hollywood not so much as the story of a rapper who acts, but as an artist who possesses multiple talents, which include making music and movies.

Despite the box office and critical success Cube experienced in his first two films, he faced a relatively bumpy future in the years immediately after the release of Boyz N the Hood. His next two films—The Glass Shield and Higher Learning—while certainly more reflective of his politics, were universally panned, failing to meet box office expectations as well. Both films were criticized for their over-the-top depictions of race and their focus on white-on-black racism. Although Cube’s supporting performances illustrate his growth as actor—in The Glass Shield, in which he plays an innocent man arrested and charged with a crime by the racist Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department, and in Higher Learning, where he plays Fudge, a campus radical who counsels Malik (Omar Epps) and other black students on the realities of race and resistance on a post–civil rights college campus—he could not escape the criticism of these films (although several reviews did describe him as exceptional). Still, his work in these films further solidified his place in Hollywood, opening up opportunities for greater artistic control.

At the same time Cube was achieving greater control of his film work, he made peace with N.W.A, the group he had left because he wasn’t given equal
compensation for his lyrics and vocals. (see sidebar: N.W.A. Reunion). He met with Eazy-E shortly before Eazy’s death from AIDS in March, 1995. The former bandmates put their grudge to rest, and Ice Cube put this part of his musical past behind him just as his debut as a screenwriter was about to make him a bigger movie star. Friday, which was written by Ice Cube and DJ Pooh, was released on April 26, 1995. Marketed with slogans like “A lot can go down between Thursday and Saturday,” Friday was a surprising comedic success. In fact, critics and moviegoers alike seemed shocked by Cube’s successful turn to comedy, given his place in the American consciousness as angry, militant, and always serious and scowling. Perhaps to highlight this shift from the typical Ice Cube image, his character Craig wears the same clothes in Friday’s opening scene as Doughboy wore in his final scene in Boyz N the Hood. Craig is a relatively conservative Los Angelino, whose unjust firing from his underpaying job leads him to spend his Friday chillin’ with Smokey (Chris Tucker). Cube uses Friday to build on the narrative offered in “It Was a Good Day,” chronicling the goodness in chillin’ with one’s homies even on those days marked by the most heartache and injustice.

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**N.W.A. Reunion**

David J. Leonard

Ice Cube left N.W.A. in 1989 over contract disputes, and he and the group recorded several songs dissing each other until Dr. Dre became unhappy with the N.W.A. contract terms as well, and left the group to form Death Row Records in 1991. Dre’s departure marked the end of N.W.A, and he and Eazy-E continued the war of words in their subsequent releases. With such public animosity between group members, an N.W.A. reunion seemed unlikely, but in 1994, Dre reunited with Ice Cube to record “Natural Born Killaz,” and in 1995, Ice Cube and Eazy-E put their beef to rest during a meeting at Tunnel, a popular New York City nightclub. Less than three months later, Eazy-E died from AIDS, yet the truce that he and Cube had struck during this meeting would have lasting effects on Cube, N.W.A., and hip hop as a whole. In 1998, Ice Cube and Dre invited their former bandmate MC Ren to record two new N.W.A. tracks: “Hello” was included on Ice Cube’s War & Peace: Volume Two, and “Chin Check” was featured on the soundtrack to Ice Cube’s film Next Friday. Neither song featured N.W.A’s fifth member, DJ Yella, and Snoop Dogg replaced Eazy-E on “Chin Check.” Although a planned full-length reunion album never happened, Ice Cube, Dre, Yella, and Ren, joined by Snoop, Nate Dogg, and other N.W.A. associates, came together for an N.W.A. reunion concert on March 11, 2000. While these collaborations never amounted to a full-fledged N.W.A. reunion., the fanfare generated once again reminded the hip hop world of the power of unity and the legendary status of the original gangstas of hip hop.
the movie itself, which received many positive reviews, Ice Cube stole the
show as both a writer and a comedic actor. Review after review heaped praise
on Cube for his humor, his talents as a writer, and his growth as an actor. He
would receive similar critical praise, although not at the same level, following
the release of *The Players Club* in 1998, which he wrote, directed, and pro-
duced (he also has a small part in the film). *The Players Club* tells the story of
Dina Armstrong (Lisa Raye), who turns to stripping following an argument
with her father, that results in her leaving home with her son. Hoping to make
a film that touched upon the southern black strip club industry and the
complexities and difficulties facing young black women, and explored the
sacrifices people make to better themselves in the long term, Cube wasn’t
satisfied with a role as writer and producer, deciding to go behind the camera
as the director, despite having no training. Having a vision and clear under-
standing of where the picture needed to go required him to take on the
responsibility of directing.

He was able to hold to his vision, delivering a film that spoke to those issues
while also being commercially viable (despite a small budget and limited
release, it amassed $20 million at the box office). However, the film wasn’t
so well received by critics, who once again questioned Cube’s gender politics.
To many, the film seemed to glorify stripping, ostensibly celebrating the
sexualization of black women’s bodies. Though these reviews lacked depth,
it seemed that Cube had not outrun the criticism that had defined his early
years in hip hop. While opportunities increased with his heightened creative
power, Cube remained outside the Hollywood mainstream. All that would
change with the release of *Three Kings*.

Debuting in September 1999, *Three Kings* was an immediate hit with
audiences and reviewers alike, something new given the responses to the Gulf
War in the early 1990s. The movie starred George Clooney (Archie Gates)
and Mark Wahlberg (Troy Barlow) along with Ice Cube (Chief Elgin). For
Cube, beyond being part of a successful and politically progressive (in his
mind at least) film, *Three Kings* provided him the opportunity to grow as an
actor, revealing his talents beyond gangstas and black-theme films. Whether
in his ability to deliver a character that was both tough and vulnerable, or the
ease with which he meshed with Clooney and Wahlberg, reviewers and others
in Hollywood paid notice to his performance specifically. What seemed to
shock reviewers the most and probably opened the most doors was the fact
that Cube, the one-time face of gangsta rap in Hollywood, with ease played a
soldier, one who was deeply religious and spiritual no less. Delivering a
wonderful performance in a film described as a masterpiece by Roger Ebert
and a classic by several others, *Three Kings* further elevated Cube’s acting
career, resulting in increased opportunities in mainstream films, including

Even with Cube’s success as a prominent supporting actor among Holly-
wood’s elite and the opportunities to participate in blockbuster films, he
remained an active member of a black Hollywood contingent. In 2000, he wrote, produced, and starred in *Next Friday*; then in 2002, he also wrote, produced, and starred in both *All About the Benjamins* and *Friday After Next*. That same year, he starred in the immensely popular *Barbershop*, with Cedric the Entertainer and Eve. Cube once again defied expectations and stereotypes, playing Calvin, a relatively conservative barbershop owner, who spends most of his day wondering how he can live the American Dream with his wife and trying to control his hip hop clientele and employees. Despite playing a character that was a mere shadow of his hip hop beginnings, it was clear that he couldn’t outrun his past. As they would again with the release of *Are We There Yet?* (2005), fans and critics alike questioned if Cube had sold out, if the allure of Hollywood had forced Cube to abandon his hardness, his politics, and his willingness to keep it real. Interestingly, Cube and others have continually argued that his importance in *Barbershop* and his contributions to the film have often been devalued because of widespread contempt for hip hop and fears over continued distaste for him by audiences. For example, Cube has long noted how Oprah and others invited Cedric the Entertainer and Eve and not him to promote the film, which demonstrates that neither he nor hip hop had been fully accepted in the mainstream. Despite this and similar rejections, the contributions of Ice Cube to the American cinematic landscape demand recognition, as Cube continues to add controversy with a conscience to the realm of popular culture.

**ICE CUBE’S IMPACT AND LEGACY**

In “True to the Game,” Ice Cube laments the practice of black artists and other celebrities selling out upon crossing over, leaving behind the artistry and community that allowed them to “blow up.” Ironically, his career path and choices have been subjected to similar criticism. His virtual disappearance from the rap game, his performance in films such as *Barbershop* and *Are We There Yet?*, have raised questions of his commitment to hip hop and its gangsta/political roots. For example, many have criticized him for his performance in *Barbershop*, not so much because he trades in his khakis and AK-47 for business attire and a set of clippers, but for playing a character, Calvin, who buddies up with the police and shows a propensity to celebrate bootstrap individualism. Likewise, others have wondered how Cube can claim to be a voice of the underclass, doing movies about the black middle class.

Jeff Chang and other hip hop critics have thoroughly discounted such accusations as both simplistic and reactionary. Rather, he and others see Cube’s career as an allegory for hip hop, elucidating the powerful ways in which hip hop and the American cultural landscape have matured over the last twenty years. Likewise, Cube is quick to challenge these criticisms, noting that just because his worldview has changed doesn’t mean he is selling out the
community. In his estimation, he has merely matured and grown as a person and artist. Moreover, he and others (Ludacris, 50 Cent) are quick to point out that denunciations of him for selling out are ridiculous given the continued demonization and criticism faced by hip hop. Just because he makes movies with George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg, just because his albums have gone triple platinum or he is able to produce or direct various projects, doesn’t mean that he or other black hip hop artists have made it. Racism and the widespread demonization of black youth preclude full acceptance of Ice Cube or hip hop in general from the mainstream. From Bill O’Reilly and Lynne Cheney to C. Delores Tucker and Oprah Winfrey, whom Cube has described as disrespectful, distant, or hostile to hip hop artists, many continue to see hip hop not only as outside the mainstream of America but as a dangerous pollutant to its cultural fabric. If still not mainstream, it is certainly difficult to accuse Cube of selling out.

In 2006, Ice Cube coproduced and helped created the controversial FX show, Black. White., which brought a black and white family together to experience an alternative racial reality through the use of makeup. For Cube, this show created an environment of forced engagement and dialogue for both the show’s participants and its viewers. Although some saw it as further evidence of Cube’s fall/ascension into the American mainstream, the show itself and its intent follow in the footsteps of the vast majority of his works: It sought to provoke conversation, offer commentary on contemporary racial issues, and made no attempt to avoid controversy; it was classic Ice Cube. Whether with “Fuck Tha Police,” “We Had to Tear This Motherfucker Up,” “Cave Bitch,” Boyz N the Hood, The Player’s Club, Three Kings, or Barbershop, Ice Cube’s career has been a story of controversy, of public outrage and redemption, of his using art and popular culture to foster self-reflection and conversation, and his performing different identities in different instances, not only showing his own growth but illustrating the shifting cultural landscape that sought different identities within him at different moments in American history.

See also: Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, Public Enemy

WORKS CITED


FURTHER RESOURCES


**SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY**

**N.W.A.**


**Ice Cube**

In his 2005 album *The Documentary*, Compton rapper the Game establishes his gangsta stance by affiliating himself with West Coast producer Dr. Dre and rapper Snoop Dogg (together they are mentioned thirty-five times). Such name dropping in rap songs is meant to legitimize an artist’s position through his or her connections with iconic artists, in this case Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre, undisputed icons of West Coast gangsta rap. Jay-Z uses a similar technique in his song “Change Clothes,” where he defines his high-ranking status
in East Coast rap through a comparison to Snoop Dogg’s importance in the West. In “Flowin’ on the D-Line,” Digital Underground’s rapper Shock-G expresses his ruthlessness toward women through a direct allusion to Dr. Dre’s notorious physical assault on Dee Barnes, *Pump It Up*’s TV host. (On January 27, 1991, Dr. Dre got into a physical confrontation with the presenter after she presented an unfavorable segment on N.W.A. on her Fox TV rap video show.)

The success of tactical name dropping is highly dependent on the interpretive skills of the listener, for such links are ineffective when the listener cannot identify the artists named. The widespread references to Dre and Snoop Dogg in rap lyrics, then, indicate their importance as icons of hip hop. Dre and Snoop have established their iconic positions through a history of musical innovation. Dre was a founding member of N.W.A., who developed a new sound and propelled West Coast gangsta rap to national attention. After that group broke up in 1991, Dre introduced Snoop Dogg, a new MC whose unique slang and laid-back lyrical flow brought a new vocal style to fit with Dre’s G-funk (gangstafied funk) production.

Artistic innovations aside, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s ties to the streets and their conventional celebration of a gangsta hedonism greatly contributed to their high-ranking status and helped establish them as major forces in the music industry. Dre and Snoop’s biographies follow a gangsta rap course that takes them out of the streets and into the studio. In gangsta rap, issues of authenticity, credibility, and legitimacy are integrally linked to the streets of the ghetto and their social practices. As the sociocultural matrix of rap music, ghetto streets remain, three decades after rap hit the mainstream, its paradigmatic habitat. In this respect, a catchphrase like “keepin’ it real” literally means representing, realistically or through hyperbolic gangsta narratives, the symbolic forms of the ghetto. The final battle that opposes Eminem’s character B. Rabbit and Papa Doc in the movie *8 Mile* offers striking evidence of the importance of this social and symbolic space. Rabbit defeats and humiliates his opponent by exposing his middle-class origins; Papa Doc went to private school and comes from a good home, so therefore he is not keepin’ it real by posing as a gangsta in his lyrics. This strategy of exposing middle-class backgrounds is prevalent in hip hop. In one well-known example, Craig G defeated freestyle champion Supernatural in a battle after he emphasized his opponent’s inappropriate geographical origin; Craig G was from New York, the birthplace of hip hop, whereas Supernatural was originally from Indiana. Similarly, the career of rapper Vanilla Ice abruptly ended when his claim of being from the streets was challenged by factual evidence that he had in fact experienced a middle-class upbringing and had never been involved in crime.

Recent releases and record sales confirm the current dominance of ghetto rap, an assortment of heterogeneous rap productions signifying streets of the ghetto, most particularly with labels like G-Unit, Roc-A-Fella, or Aftermath, whose artists generally glorify a criminal lifestyle and street corner activities.
(drug pushing, organized crime, pimping). This institutionalization of rap music as street/ghetto music is crucial to understanding the central status of both Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. The power struggle that animates rap music is undeniably dominated by ghettocentric orientations. Through a logic of inclusion and exclusion, the rap artists who develop street themes in their music, and who are somehow related to the streets, hold considerable symbolic capital. They are (according to the slang of the time period) dope, fresh, or gangsta, while rappers with no connection to the streets are generally wack, lame, or wanksta. Accordingly, if lyrical references to Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg imply symbolic capital, these rappers’ association with the streets is equally important.

**DR. DRE**

Andre Romel Young was born on February 18, 1965, in Compton, a city of the Los Angeles metropolitan area that would become, twenty years later, as important as the South Bronx in the geography of rap music (see sidebar: Compton). In fact, before the commotion caused by Ice-T’s “Six N the Morning” and N.W.A.’s album *Straight Outta Compton*, California rap had very little echo outside local venues like Radiotron or the Eve After Dark. One of the most prominent contributors to the electro rap scene was the World Class...
Wreckin’ Cru, a DJ group managed by ex-break dancer Lonzo Williams. Williams’ DJs were extremely popular during the first half of the 1980s and packed venues like the Sports Arena or the Convention Center with thousands of poppers and lockers (aka b-boys or break dancers) from South Central, Compton, and Inglewood. Andre started his producing career as a member of this group in 1984. He had developed an interest in music from a young age, and, encouraged by a music-loving mother, spent hours practicing his skills on turntables and mixing tables. Onstage, Dre wore a costume, including a stethoscope, and performed as “Dr. Dre,” an homage to NBA superstar Julius “Dr. J” Irving.

Thanks to his performances with the World Class Wreckin’ Cru and on KDAY, a local radio station, which, under the notable influence of Greg Mack, supported several local acts, Dr. Dre soon attained local celebrity status. As a result, he appeared regularly on shows like Traffic Jam and Mixmasters, a Saturday night all-star show where DJs from local crews mixed live and played their own productions. In 1984 he released “Surgery” on Macola Records, a local label owned by Don MacMillan. This title, based on his doctor persona, exploited his “beat surgeon” gimmick through a clinical arrangement of connotative samples (“Records! Mixer! Turntables!” replaced Scalpel! Forceps! Defibrillator!). The following year, World Class Wreckin’ Cru released World Class, its first album. The reasonable success of this album, along with that of other Los Angeles–based electro rap musicians (On the Nile by Egyptian Lover, Rockberry Jam by the L.A. Dream Team, Naughty Boy by Uncle Jam’s Army) rapidly stirred the interest of major record companies. The group was signed on CBS/Epic and in 1987 released First Round Knock-Out. This release put the Los Angeles rap scene on the map and, with its California imagery, clearly distinguished West Coast rap from East Coast rap. While rap music had diversified in New York and was no longer exclusively party music, the Los Angeles rap scene had principally exalted partying and hedonism over electronic melodies. This idiosyncratic aspect of the Angelino musical scene is loosely portrayed in Breakin’ and Breakin’ 2, two low-budget movies that presented a Hollywood version of the visual gimmicks, outfits, and Jheri curls that prevailed at the time. This imagery would radically change with Ice-T’s 1986 single “Six N the Morning” and with Dr. Dre’s next group, Niggaz with Attitude.

In 1986, Dre had started collaborating with Eric Wright (Eazy-E), an ambitious young drug pusher eager to launch his rap label, Ruthless Records. Wright, though he believed in the commercial potential of the new and
scandalous gangsta themes developed by Ice-T in “Six N the Morning,” had no serious connections in the music business (see sidebar: Eazy-E). In contrast, Dr. Dre benefited from solid experience and considerable social capital in the fast-growing LA rap scene. He especially had connections at Macola Records and at Audio Achievements, the studio where he recorded with the World Class Wreckin’ Cru, which would help Wright achieve his artistic and financial ambitions in the lucrative business that rap music was becoming. Their first release was “Boyz N the Hood.” This street manifesto, on which Eazy-E rapped lyrics written by O’shea Jackson (Ice Cube) over Dr. Dre’s production, laid the foundations of their N.W.A. collaboration to come. Ruthless Records, owing to the decisive entrepreneurial skills that Eazy-E had developed pushing drugs, independently sold more than 200,000 copies of “Boyz N the Hood.” In the wake of this success, Eazy-E, with the help of his manager Jerry Heller, a long-established music executive, launched Niggaz with Attitude, a rap group that rapidly became, with the vernacular appeal of its exaltation of ghetto lifestyle and Dr. Dre’s skillful production, a national musical sensation that would give its members an unparalleled status in rap.

The first significant release of Ruthless Records produced by Dr. Dre was its founder’s solo effort, *Eazy-Duz-It* (1987). It was followed the next year by

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**Eazy-E**

**David Diallo**

Folklore research on orality in black ghettos has established the importance of toasts—violent and obscene oral narratives recounting the exploits of “Ba-ad Niggers.” In 1987, when Eazy-E (Eric Wright) founded Ruthless Records and N.W.A., he musically and parochially adjusted the themes and narrative structure of these long-standing heroic tales and paved the way for much of what would subsequently be labeled gangsta rap. As a former drug pusher, Wright fruitfully applied to the music industry the commercial skills that he had been developing on the streets and turned Ruthless into a foremost label. His early releases became underground hits with virtually no support from radio, the press, or MTV. In 1991, however, the label’s maximizing business tactics led to financial disagreements between N.W.A. members. Dr. Dre’s bitter departure ignited a vivid feud with Ruthless. Eazy-E riposted to the merciless attacks that Dre had launched on *The Chronic* through his 1993 EP *It’s On (Dr. Dre) 187um Killa* on which he exhibited a ridiculing photograph of Dre taken during his World Class Wreckin’ Cru days. Even though Ice Cube and Dr. Dre, who had been the principal creative forces in the label, had left Ruthless, Eazy-E’s entrepreneurial skills helped him to maintain healthy record sales, mostly through lucrative groups like Above the Law and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony. He was thirty-one years old when he died on March 26, 1995, ten days after having been diagnosed with AIDS.
one of the most important albums in hip hop history, N.W.A.’s first official release, *Straight Outta Compton* (1988). By the end of 1987, even though Don MacMillan, willing to cash in on the increasing appeal of the self-proclaimed world’s most dangerous group, had opportunistically released *N.W.A. and the Posse*, a compilation of Macola-distributed N.W.A. EPs (“Boyz N the Hood,” “Dopeman,” “8-ball,” and “A Bitch Is a Bitch”), *Straight Outta Compton* was the first official album of the group. The commercial success of this highly controversial album paved the way for much of what would be termed gangsta rap in the 1990s. On this record, N.W.A. carried on the glorification of the activities of local gangs inaugurated on *Eazy-Duz-It* and emphatically put Compton on the map, owing greatly to its outrageous lyrics and to Dre’s rumbling sonic production on the opening tracks, “Straight Outta Compton,” “Fuck Tha Police,” and “Gangsta Gangsta.” *100 Miles and Runnin’* (1990), the group’s second LP, released after Ice Cube’s departure, was a ghetto variation of the slave narrative motif that presented soon-to-be-generic hyperbolic gangsta narratives. In spite of its obscene and violent content, it reached the twenty-seventh place on the Billboard Top 200 (*Straight Outta Compton* had ranked thirty-seventh the previous year). In 1991, N.W.A.’s final release, *Efil4zaggin* (*Niggaz4Life* spelled backward) entered the charts at number one and established rap music (with the parallel success of rap groups like Public Enemy and 2 Live Crew) as the new defiant musical expression. If, conforming to N.W.A.’s trademarks, this album contained larger-than-life violence (on “Appetite 4 Destruction” and “One in a Million”) and pornography (on “She Swallowed It”), even both (on Dr. Dre’s gory “One Less Bitch”), its generic gangsta themes were enhanced by sepulchral moods that distinctively differed from N.W.A.’s previous releases. This inclination toward gothic sonorities, prominent keyboards, and heavy beats would lead to the crafting of Dr. Dre’s signature sound.

In 1989, Dr. Dre had single-handedly produced the D.O.C.’s first LP, *No One Can Do It Better*. Hitherto he had jointly produced Eazy-E and N.W.A.’s albums with fellow World Class Wreckin’ Cru member DJ Yella. On this album, Dre displayed the range of his experienced production and provided the D.O.C. with an assemblage of slow and fast rhythms on which the skilled Texan MC delivered his resourceful lyrics. This noteworthy collaboration is representative of what would be Dr. Dre’s later approach to rap music: a polished production designed for a distinctive lyricist with concrete ties to the streets. His subsequent collaborations with Snoop Dogg, Xzibit, Eminem, 50 Cent and, more recently, the Game, testify to its particularity. Exhibiting versatility, Dre also produced his wife’s eponymous R&B album, *Michel’le* (Ruthless, 1989). On this record, Michel’le, a former chorus member of the World Class Wreckin’ Cru who had already featured on *No One Can Do It Better*, sang urban romances on her husband’s electronic melodies. Its single “No More Lies” became the best hit single in the label’s history (seventh place on the Billboard charts). Later on, Dr. Dre would successfully repeat a similar

In 1987, financial and artistic disagreements ended Dre’s collaboration with Lonzo Williams’s entertainment-formatted group. Similar financial issues would end Dre’s partnership with Eazy-E’s Ruthless Records after the 1991 release of their final album, *Efil4zaggin*. After Ice Cube’s departure and the D.O.C.’s serious car accident, Dr. Dre was the key creative force on the label. He had significantly participated in the production of all its major releases (*Supersonic*, *Eazy-Duz-It*, *Straight Outta Compton*, *No One Can Do It Better*, *Above the Law’s Livin’ Like Hustlers*, *Michel’le*), but considered that he had not been rewarded satisfactorily. In 1991, he left Ruthless at the peak of its popularity and cofounded Death Row Records.

Dr. Dre’s new partner was Marion “Suge” Knight, a determined ex-gang banger turned bodyguard who, inspired by Ruthless’s achievements, was equally eager to succeed in the music industry. With Dick Griffey, an influential label owner (he was at the head of SOLAR, the Sound of Los Angeles Records), Dr. Dre and Suge Knight launched Death Row Records, a label that would rapidly become the first-ranking black-owned business in America and would top the U.S. charts half a dozen times between 1992 and 1996.

In 1992, Dr. Dre released “Deep Cover,” his first solo EP on Sony and SOLAR. Its gothic sonorities, combined with Colin Wolfe’s prominent bass line, clearly bore the signature sound Dre had introduced in *Efil4zaggin*. It also marked the debut of newcomer Snoop Doggy Dogg, a young MC from Long Beach who contributed to a great extent to the success of the producer’s first album, *The Chronic* (1992). This multiplatinum album, which showcased several local MCs (Nate Dogg, Daz) was the second milestone of rap music produced by Dr. Dre. It forcefully introduced his patented G-funk sound, a transformation of P-funk’s substantial catalogue into gangsta rap, and decisively affected mainstream hip hop. Its celebration of a gangsta lifestyle, particularly on the hit singles “Nuthin’ but a G Thang” and “Let Me Ride,” with their parochial idiosyncrasies and sociolect, greatly influenced the subsequent rap productions, locally and nationwide, and firmly consolidated Dr. Dre’s emblematic status.

Even though he had been prolific at Ruthless Records, producing or collaborating on the seven releases of the label (in five years), Dr. Dre only produced two albums between 1993 and 1996, *The Chronic* and Snoop Dogg’s debut album, *Doggystyle*. He nonetheless produced a few tracks for Death Row soundtracks and upcoming artists, most notably Lady of Rage’s ego trip “Afro Puffs” in 1994 and 2Pac’s “California Love,” a highly successful title (on which Dr. Dre sampled Ronnie Hudson and the Street People’s “West Coast Poplock” and Roger Zapp’s “So Ruff, So Tuff”) that blatantly symbolized his long-standing effort to establish California as a serious rival to the New York seminal rap scene. Due to various artistic disagreements and to the
culture of terror that Suge Knight had transplanted from the violent world of street gangs to Death Row, Dr. Dre left the label in 1996 to create his own company, Aftermath Entertainment.

Dr. Dre’s important achievements and his longevity had granted him high status in the rap industry. His collaborations with street-oriented groups like N.W.A., whose “Boyz N the Hood” figuratively expressed the worldview of many young blacks trapped in ghettos, with Snoop Dogg and 2Pac, two rappers who epitomized a hedonistic gangsta lifestyle, and, more recently, with record-selling rappers Eminem and 50 Cent, decisively conferred unfaltering credibility on him. On 2Pac’s “California Love,” Dre justified his legitimacy by drawing listeners’ attention to his longevity in rap and reminded them that he had been in it for ten years. He would subsequently reiterate this self-referential strategy to signify his authenticity. He emphasized it on the opening of Dr. Dre Presents . . . The Aftermath (1996), the first release of his new label, and even more notably on its song “Been There Done That.” Eminem did it in his place on “Guilty Conscience,” the third single of his successful and controversial Slim Shady LP, and reiterated on the chorus of “Forgot About Dre,” on Chronic 2001, the sequel to Dre’s first album where this motif is extensively developed (particularly on “The Watcher,” “Still D.R.E.,” “Forgot About Dre”). Most importantly, as he proclaims on “Still D.R.E.,” Dr. Dre stayed close to the streets and successfully produced underground sensations and respected battle rhymers with an indisputable street credibility like Xzibit (Restless), the Game (The Documentary), Eminem, and 50 Cent, whose respective albums The Marshall Mathers LP and Get Rich or Die Tryin’ are two of the best-selling rap albums of all time.

Even though Dr. Dre’s status derives from the representations, in his productions, of his sociogeographic origins, he nevertheless holds an important symbolic status in the nationwide field of rap music. He collaborated without prejudice with artists from both coasts (in 1997 on The Firm, a project that featured New York rappers like Nas and Foxy Brown, or in 1996 with Black-street on the hit single “No Diggity”), incidentally challenging the East Coast–West Coast enmity so hyped in the news. The focus on the spatial (the hood/the streets) being, in rap music, as important as the local (Compton, California), Dr. Dre’s idealization of the criminal lifestyle that distinguished the streets of Los Angeles in the late eighties spoke instinctively to young blacks of both coasts. This street-oriented discourse undeniably helped establish him as a major force in the music industry.

SNOOP DOGG

Though Dr. Dre became famous as a key member of N.W.A., the group that would determinedly epitomize gangsta rap, he was never involved in gangs. In contrast, Snoop Dogg (Calvin Broadus) unambiguously draws his credibility
as an original gangsta (OG) from his criminal feats. Eazy-E, however, would dispute Snoop’s criminal background by calling him and Dre “studio gangstas” on his 1993 EP *It’s On (Dr. Dre)* 187um Killa (see sidebar: Studio Gangsta). Eazy’s criticism aside, Snoop emphasizes his gang affiliation and criminal involvement as a key part of his credibility. Snoop was born on October 20, 1972, and grew up in Long Beach, California with his brother and his mother, who originally hailed from Mississippi. The number of

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**Studio Gangsta**

_Elijah Lossner_

The term *studio gangsta* came into popular use among rappers during the early 1990s. It was used to describe rappers who portrayed themselves as gangsters in their lyrics but in reality had never been directly involved with crime or street gangs. Many believe the term was first used in Los Angeles during the late 1980s and began popping up in the song lyrics of popular West Coast rappers in the early nineties.

One of the first rappers to use this term was Oakland rapper Spice 1. The first two words on his 1993 album, *187 He Wrote* are “studio gangsta” (187 is the Los Angeles police code for homicide). On another song, “All He Wrote,” he questions how many rappers who say they are gang banging are really doing it. Spice 1 goes on to list many of the rappers he thinks are real gangsters (he never mentions any rappers he thinks are studio gangstas). That same year, rap icon Eazy-E released an EP, *It’s On (Dr. Dre)* 187um Killa, in which he calls into question the credibility of his former N.W.A. bandmate Dr. Dre. On Eazy’s song “Real Muthaphuckkin G’s,” guest rapper B.G. Knock Out calls Snoop Doggy Dogg and Dr. Dre “studio gangstas” and “actors.” The EP’s liner notes feature a picture of Dr. Dre in his days with the 1980s dance group World Class Wreckin’ Cru, in which Dre is wearing lipstick, eyeliner, and a sequined jumpsuit.

As gangsta rap gained popularity during the early 1990s, it seemed that everyone wanted to rap about crime and murder. Murder was what was selling and many talented rap artists felt the pressure to conform to the violent lyrics in order to survive. The market was overflowing with artists claiming to be gang bangers, provoking many established and respected gangsta rappers to do some housecleaning. Thus the term *studio gangsta* became a very popular way for rappers to call their colleagues into question. If an artist was considered a studio gangsta by his peers, or worse by consumers, then it could very well spell disaster for his career. There is much resentment among rappers who consider themselves real gangstas of the ones whom they perceive as fake.

The appeal of gangsta rap seems to rely strongly on the assumption that what is being said in the lyrics is actually occurring, or at least has occurred in that artist’s life. The importance of authenticity in gangsta rap lyrics is unlike
female-headed households more than doubled between 1960 and 2000, and this type of household saw particular growth in ghetto communities. Correspondingly, rappers regularly describe his household in their lyrics (for example, in Jay-Z’s “December 4th,” Obie Trice’s “Don’t Come Down,” Goodie Mob’s “Mama”). The Broadus family lived on the east side of Long Beach, on Twenty-first Street. In conformity with rap and hip hop’s emphasis on the sociogeographic origins of rappers, Snoop devoted a song to this street on his album *Murder Was the Case* in 1994 (“21 Jump Street”). This association with the neighborhood, an inherent characteristic that emphasizes hip hop’s connection to the social practices of youth gangs, frequently comes out in Snoop Dogg’s lyrics and biography. For example, a large number of his songs mention “the LBC,” a reference to Long Beach City, the Long Beach Crips, or to Long Beach, California.

Nicknamed “Snoop” by his mother because of his resemblance to Charles Schultz’ well-known comic strip character, Snoopy, Calvin rapidly became a member of the Rolling 20s, a street gang affiliated with the Crips. He consistently draws on the symbolic value of this prominent gang for street credibility throughout his musical career. For instance, in one of his hit singles, “Drop It Like It’s Hot” (2005), he hints at his allegiance to this gang by keeping a blue flag hanging on the left side of his back (the Crip side). During his gang banging years, Snoop had quite a few brushes with the law and spent several months behind bars. He was in and out of jail for the three years after he graduated from high school. Such experiences were far from unusual at that period. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, one third of the black males between eighteen and twenty-nine, and up to 80 percent in disadvantaged inner cities of large urban centers, were either in prison or on probation. In parallel to his criminal activities, Snoop had developed an interest in rap music. This practice, like sports and the entertainment industry in the past, was becoming a legitimate means to earn money and gain social status for many young black males living in the ghetto. Like many other youngsters, Snoop was making homemade rap tapes and was part of a rap group. With his friends Nathaniel Hale (Nate Dogg) and Warren Griffin (Warren G), he formed 213 (they reunited in 2004 to release the album *The Hard Way* on Doggy Style Records). This name, which referred to a Los Angeles area code, explicitly pointed to their habitat. In spring 1992, Dr. Dre, who had detected Snoop’s distinctive laconic drawl on a tape of the 213 that Warren G, his stepbrother, had given him, invited the young rapper to feature on “Deep Cover.” The premise of this song—the brutal murder of an undercover cop—was not
unfamiliar to Snoop. He had formerly done time in prison for trying to sell crack to an undercover police officer. Through this song, he seized the opportunity to figuratively take revenge by committing “187”—the LA police code for a homicide—on a fictional undercover cop. “Deep Cover” led to numerous successful collaborations between Dr. Dre and his new protégé. In the wake of “Deep Cover,” Snoop Dogg appeared on The Chronic’s first single and biggest hit, “Nuthin’ but a G Thang,” on eight other songs of the album (“Lil’ Ghetto Boy,” “Stranded on Death Row,” “The Day the Niggaz Took Over”) and on the hit single “Dre Day.”

After this promising debut, Snoop’s short career took an ominous turn in August 1993. While recording his own debut album with Dre, Snoop Dogg was arrested in the shooting death of a member of a rival gang and remained caught up in legal procedures for nearly three years. He was driving the car from which McKinley “Big Malik” Lee, his bodyguard, shot Philip Wolde-marian, a young rival gang banger. Under California law, Snoop, even though he was behind the wheel and did not wield a gun, was equally responsible and liable to the same sentence. Although this case was effective publicity for his upcoming album, Snoop was facing a very severe sentence, especially because of his criminal past. In November 1993, he released Doggystyle and sold approximately 800,000 copies in a week. The album, benefiting from the hype about Snoop, which had started on “Deep Cover” and gone sky-high on The Chronic, entered the charts at number one, establishing a record that only 50 Cent’s Get Rich or Die Tryin’—another Dr. Dre production—would top a decade later, and greatly contributed to the takeover of West Coast G-funk. Its singles “What’s My Name?” and “Gin and Juice” reached the Top 10 and the album stayed in the charts for the several months, during which a public debate raged over Snoop’s murder trial and his violent and sexist lyrics. Within a few months, he had become a household name, owing his instant notoriety as much to the heavy rotation of “Nuthin’ but a G Thang” and “Dre Day” videos in 1993 and “What’s My Name” and “Gin & Juice” in 1994 as to a series of news reports of his trial that blended legal reports and excerpts of his songs or videos. This dissolution of fiction into reality caused a media maelstrom over rap music and its violent criminal imagery that would greatly contribute to the enduring stigmatization of this mode of expression. Gangsta rap consequently became the focal point of a public debate about violence and censorship, with Snoop Dogg often used as the epitome of violent and misogynistic musicians. Newsweek magazine, on the front page of its November 29, 1993, issue presented a picture of Snoop Dogg captioned with the question: “When Is Rap 2 Violent?” Similarly, while the rapper was touring in England in the spring of 1994, London’s tabloid Daily Star, supported by a Tory representative, pleaded for the government to throw the rapper out of the country with the front-page headline: “Kick This Evil Bastard Out!”

The heated debate around Snoop’s greatly publicized trial was nonetheless good publicity for Death Row. In 1994, Dr. Dre directed Murder Was the
Case, a short film about the fictional murder of Snoop Dogg. The nineteen-minute film works almost as an extended music video for the Doggystyle song “Murder Was the Case” that called attention to Snoop’s pending court case and his gangsta persona. Both the song and the film presented the murder of Snoop Dogg’s character rather than portraying him as a killer. The film’s soundtrack debuted at number one. It included a remix of the original “Murder Was the Case” and showcased label mates such as Tha Dogg Pound and DJ Quick. It also marked the reunion of Dr. Dre and Ice Cube on “Natural Born Killaz,” a song named after Oliver Stone’s controversial film. After this soundtrack, Snoop Dogg spent the following months preparing for his lawsuit, which finally went to trial in late 1995. Thanks to the defense of Death Row’s legal representative, David Keller, an expert in criminal courts, and to Death Row’s financial backing, Snoop Dogg was officially acquitted on self-defense grounds in February 1996 and could resume his career on better terms. He would nevertheless have to wait another year to release his second album. In October 1995, Suge Knight had signed rapper Tupac Shakur on Death Row and Snoop Dogg was no longer the label’s leading light. In addition, because of the label’s commercial strategy to release low-cost, highly profitable soundtracks (Deep Cover, Above the Rim, Murder Was the Case, Gang Related), solo projects were frequently postponed. This strategy, even though it was financially profitable, drained Death Row of some of its promising artists (both Warren G and the D.O.C. had left the label in 1994). In November 1996, Snoop Dogg finally released his second album, Tha Doggfather. By that time, the appeal of Death Row’s gangsta rap had begun to fade, dragged down by the violent murder of Tupac Shakur and the racketeering indictment of Suge Knight. Dr. Dre had left Death Row earlier that year, so Snoop coproduced The Doggfather with Dat Nigga Daz and DJ Pooh. Even though his distinctive flow was no longer enriched by Dre’s G-funk sound, the album sold approximately 2 million copies, half as many as quadruple-platinum Doggystyle.

In 1998, frustrated by Death Row’s strong-arm business methods, Snoop Dogg left Death Row and California to relocate to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and sign with Master P’s label, No Limit. Snoop appeared on most of the label releases that year and the next. Between 1998 and 2000, the rapper fulfilled No Limit’s heavy release schedule and recorded three solo albums, Da Game Is to Be Sold Not to Be Told in 1998, No Limit Top Dogg in 1999 (featuring appearances by Dr. Dre, Warren G, and Nate Dogg), and Dead Man Walkin’ in 2000. In 2000 he also released Tha Last Meal (Priority/Capitol Records), on which he developed a laid-back pimp persona that somehow deviated from his hard-core gang-banging debut. In 2002 Snoop Dogg effectively reinforced his star status in rap music with the successful release of his album Paid tha Cost to Be da Boss, which featured the hit singles and videos “From tha Chuuuch to da Palace” and “Beautiful.” He would subsequently secure this status in the following years, most notably
with his album *R&G (Rhythm & Gangsta): The Masterpiece* in 2004 and its hit single produced by the Neptunes, “Drop It Like It’s Hot.” In the meantime, Snoop Dogg had prominently appeared on Dr. Dre’s *Chronic 2001*, most notably on its hit singles “Still D.R.E.,” which marked his reunion with Dr. Dre, and “The Next Episode.” His enduring success had also opened the doors of an entertainment industry determined to cash in on the appeal of his nonchalant personality. Between 1998 and 2004, he appeared in no less than eighteen films (including *Baby Boy*, *Training Day*, *Bones*, and *The Wash* in 2001, and *Starsky and Hutch* and *Soul Plane* in 2004) and hosted his own sketch comedy show on MTV (*Doggy Fizzle Televizzle*), in addition to producing and directing music videos for himself and other artists. Similarly to Dre, with whom he periodically works, mostly to feature on albums of newcomers (Xzibit, Eminem), Snoop Dogg maintains a firm street credibility in rap music. Even though these two musicians have considerable wealth and no longer live in the ghetto, they have managed to sustain their emblematic ties to its streets. For instance, Snoop Dogg, like many other rappers (P. Diddy with Sean John, the Wu-Tang Clan with Wu-Wear, 50 Cent with G-Unit Clothing), developed his own brand of street wear (Snoop Dogg Clothing Company). In 2000 he also reinforced his connection to Long Beach by launching his own label, Doggystyle Records (formerly Dogghouse), after years of self-described “servitude” at No Limit and signed local talents like former Crip members Tha Eastsidaz (gangmates Tray Dee and Goldie Loc) and former Death Row artists.

Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s status in rap music stems, in part, from their ties, actual or symbolic, to the streets of the ghetto. It derives from a street credibility, which, in Snoop Dogg’s case, unquestionably offsets his tricky participation in a series of television commercials for T-Mobile during the 2004 Christmas season or in projects likely to harm his legitimacy in rap. This credibility, however significant, does not fully explain the prestige attached to these musicians. This high regard is equally justified by the vernacular specificity of the themes and the motifs that they developed in their music: a larger-than-life phallocentric hedonism attached to a criminal lifestyle.

**WINE, WOMEN, AND SONG “GANGSTAFIED”: DR. DRE AND SNOOP DOGG’S HEDONISM**

The proverbial formula “wine, women, and song,” a shortened expression of a German epicurean adage credited to Martin Luther, is widely acknowledged in the English language. Many folk songs, particularly drinking songs, abound with references to it. Student songs celebrating a carpe diem frame of mind greatly helped to popularize this phrase. If not with this specific triad, with a corresponding ensemble of motifs (wine, men, and song for gay men; wine, women, and Porsches, etc.). A variant of this secular axiom is at the
core of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s discourse. Even though these rappers articulate an imagery that hyperbolically reproduces the criminal activities of hustlers, they equally celebrate their pleasure-seeking practices in their party rhymes. In one skit on Eminem’s *Marshall Mathers LP*, an uncompromising record executive explains to the rapper why Dr. Dre’s records are so successful. He argues that Dre is rapping about “big-screen TVs, blunts [hollowed-out cigars refilled with marijuana], 40s and bitches.” This gangsta adjustment of Luther’s proverb constitutes the fundamentals of the hedonism that figures so largely in Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s party rhymes. These rappers express flamboyantly a gangsta lifestyle epitomized by criminal activities, a celebration of wealth and consumption, and a distinctive phallocratic hedonism. They regularly glorify illegal money and the luxurious lifestyle it offers. Based on a carpe diem motto, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s recreational activities are characterized by three forms of pleasurable indulgence: alcohol (several brands appear recurrently in their lyrics); drugs, generally marijuana (under various denominations, the most current being *chronic*); and exaggerated sexual debauchery. These practices, generally combined, as the aphorism DNA (drugs ’n’ alcohol) testifies, are particularly expressive of the gangsta mentality that guides the pleasure-seeking practices of Dre and Snoop’s gangsta personas.

As Eminem’s fictional record executive notes, a certain imagery of debauchery prevails in Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s music. In “Pass It, Pass It,” for instance, Snoop Dogg explains that smoking weed is part of what he calls a gangsta philosophy. Marijuana is invariably presented as the drug of choice of these musicians and is glorified in most of their albums. The titles and illustrations of *The Chronic* and *Chronic 2001*, whose covers respectively reproduce the logo of a rolling paper brand and a ganja leaf, unambiguously confirm this assertion. Dr. Dre exalts its consumption in almost all his tracks and recommends smoking it every day on “The Next Episode.”

In expressing a ritualistic consumption of drugs and alcohol, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s music develops a gangsta mentality that transgresses legal normative order and is resolutely in tune with ghetto hustler lifestyle, a style of fast and large living especially glorified by Snoop Dogg in numbers such as “Gin and Juice” and “Hennessy and Buddha.” As several ethnographies have revealed, valorizing an immediate hedonism, rather than rationalizing the accumulation of durable goods that we find in the conventional economy, particularizes ghetto hustlers, who tend to dissipate their profits in flamboyant expenses (at the scale of disadvantaged inner-city areas). Hence the recurrences of prestigious brands of alcohol in Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s lyrics like Hennessy or Moët & Chandon. These brands are class markers of conspicuous consumption; they express a strategy of distinction and like guns are indexic gangsta signifiers. Through their consistent use, Dre and Snoop present symbolic personas in line with a gangsta lifestyle while valorizing practices and attitudes highly regarded by a segment of ghetto youth involved in
criminal activities, as well as by a sector of suburban youth who seek oppositional forms of expression. In *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies*, the film director describes the symbolic power exerted by criminal imagery. Discussing his fascination for gangster films, especially Howard Hawks’s *Scarface* (1932), he affirms that even though the main character of this movie was vicious, immature, and irresponsible, his milieu was disturbingly attractive precisely because of its irresponsibility. Roland Barthes gives a similar argument in *Mythologies* and justifies this attraction by the fact that the world of gangsters, an irrational poetic universe, is the last refuge for fantasy. By putting an emphasis on criminal or socially disapproved practices in their lyrics, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg position themselves on the margin of the legal system and explicitly assert a gangsta mentality with a compelling symbolic resonance.

The social acknowledgment and respect young blacks of the ghetto earn for their masculinity is an achieved status they establish through their sexual prowess. Sexual activity not only enables an assessment of an individual’s masculinity, it determines the esteem that his peers have for him. As Charis E. Kubrin, leaning on the ethnographic observations of Elijah Anderson, explains, the more women with whom a young man has sex, the more esteem he accrues among his peers. This value system is regularly reproduced in the misogynist lyrics of both Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. Rap music is often singularized, as the controversy around 2 Live Crew’s *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* revealed, for its misogynist representations of social and sexual relations between men and women. This incontestable aspect, identifiable in Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s catalog, is generally expressed as part of a valorization of a gangsta lifestyle characterized by a strong emphasis on virility. The graphic and humorous circumstances these rappers communicate regularly depict relations between gangstas and women that invariably result in sexual intercourse. Lyrically, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s status, apart from their physical and verbal expressions of violent temper, has been built on their lack of respect for women. Such sexist attitudes are consistent with a conception of masculinity that apparently prevails in the ghetto. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has shown that the attachment to a set of attitudes and behaviors is considerably determined by the structural conditions of their social milieu. The assertion of attitudes attached to virility and physical strength, for instance, characterizes individuals who can only count on their physical skills to work or fight. Similarly, the assertion of an exacerbated virility among young ghetto dwellers may be viewed as a reaction to a set of social restrictions that have altered the social role and status of men among ghetto residents. Postures expressing ideas of prestige, distance, superiority over outsiders, toughness and style, postures that have caused a schism between the young black men who adopt them and women, correspond to a set of dispositions shaped by specific social constraints (racial stigmatization, low socioeconomic status).

Snoop Dogg and Dre’s strategies to adopt hypermachismo postures that
suggest distance, irony, or superiority are therefore figurative reproductions of a practical rationality produced by the conditions of existence of the black ghetto. It is interesting to point out that a similar set of hypermasculine postures characterizes calypso, a Caribbean musical expression which emanates from a social group that had to face forms of structural domination similar to the ones with which a sector of urban black youth is confronted today. Accordingly, the theatrical representations of virile, sexist, and phlegmatic attitudes presented in the lyrics of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg correspond to the exaggeration that characterizes rap music and ghetto orality. Such emotional posturing is epitomized by Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s collaboration on Dr. Dre’s song “Fuck You,” in which they express, in a stylized manner, the most salient aspects of a masculine ideal that is assumed by many young blacks living in the ghetto.

The mentality expressed by Dre and Snoop’s gangsta personas principally rests on the triad of sex, alcohol, and drugs. Such an array, if it has been studied in other expressions and other social groups, reveals, in the music of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, particularities inherent in the characteristics of the social relations of the ghetto. Luther’s adage, updated by the rockers in the seventies who celebrated “sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” finds its rap counterpart in the gangsta amendment “sex, drugs, and gangsta rap,” a sentiment expressed in a majority of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg’s lyrics.

**MIDAS TOUCH: DR. DRE’S SIGNATURE SOUND**

In an interview with the British newspaper the *Guardian* (February 20, 2004), leading rap producer Pharell Williams, though he was, at the time, behind 20 percent of the most-played rap and R&B songs on British radio stations, reverently referred to Dr. Dre as the Darth Vader of rap production and humbly compared himself to a mere storm trooper. In “We Ain’t,” a song from the Game’s album *The Documentary* on which he features multiplatinum-selling rapper Eminem, declares that only Dre can judge him for his mistakes, putting the producer on the same level as God.

Dr. Dre undeniably owes such a celebrated status to his contribution to rap music and to the innovations of his production. It is important to underscore that Dr. Dre, in contrast to a musician like Kanye West who presents himself as both a rapper and a producer, is first and foremost a producer. Throughout his career, for instance, he has generally had an accomplished lyricist writing his lyrics—Ice Cube while they were under the N.W.A. banner, then the D.O.C. on *The Chronic*, and more recently, Jay-Z on “Still D.R.E.” Unlike Snoop Dogg, who derives some of his status from his rhyming skills, his distinctive flow, and his personality, Dr. Dre derives his prestige from his invention, first with N.W.A., then with his patented G-funk, of a signature sound (and a universe) expressive of LA gang banging that would be regarded as
typically Californian. An additional look at his biography is necessary to understand the crafting of what would become this signature sound.

Like most producers who were making rap in the early eighties, Dr. Dre was heavily influenced by the seminal single “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” and rap pioneer Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock.” The impact of these New York rap records is manifest on Dr. Dre’s first productions. Its first electro rap single, “Surgery” and his contributions to First Round Knock-Out (“Cabbage Patch,” “He’s Bionic,” “House Calls”) are characterized by similar synthesizers à la Kraftwerk, fast 808 beats, multi-layered electronic sounds, and outer space imagery. Similarly, his first post-World Class Wreckin’ Cru productions resembled the synchronic minimalist sonic architecture of avant-garde East Coast rap, most notably Run-DMC’s and the Bomb Squad’s. By the mid-eighties, most rap producers shifted from the robotic aesthetic conveyed through synthesizers and TR 808 beatboxes to the raw aesthetic obtainable with samplers. This shift is noticeable on all Dr. Dre’s productions for Ruthless (1986–1991), ranging from “We Want Eazy” and “Fuck the Police,” on which he sampled James Brown’s “Funky Drummer,” to “Straight Outta Compton” or the D.O.C.’s “The Formula,” on which he sampled soul artists from the late sixties and early seventies, Wilson Pickett and Marvin Gaye respectively. With the sampler, Dr. Dre could revisit the musicians that had strongly influenced him during his formative years and use some of the records that he had been buying from Steve Yayo’s, a well-known record dealer from the Roadium, a former drive-in located in Gardena which was, in the middle eighties, a sort of Mecca for hip hop deejays of Southern California (similar to the Amoeba store in San Francisco honored on the cover of DJ Shadow’s album Endtroducing). If the funky breakbeats and dynamic syncopated rhythms of Dre’s Ruthless productions were somewhat similar to the sonic montage of Public Enemy or Boogie Down Productions, Efil4zaggin, his last production for the label, was heading in a different musical direction that would lead to the crafting of what is regarded as his signature sound. This sound, characterized by prominent bass lines, heavy keyboards, and laid-back melodies (as opposed to rapid prosaic breakbeats) was appreciably influenced by the Bay Area sound introduced by Digital Underground on Sex Packets (Tommy Boy, 1990). These self-proclaimed Sons of the P had been among the firsts (with producer Teddy Riley) to amend P-funk melodies composed by George Clinton’s musicians (Parliament Funkadelic) with slow beats and prominent synthesizers to narrate their extravagant ghetto narratives. Their distinctive approach to rap music would be the foundation of Dr. Dre’s G-funk, a conversion of Clinton’s P-Funk into slow-rolling melodies that significantly depended on prominent bass lines, synthetic symphonies, and the exaltation of a parochial gangsta lifestyle (see sidebar: The Sampler).

This sound, though it was perceptible at times on Efil4zaggin (notably on “Always into Somethin’”) would ripen on Dr. Dre’s Death Row productions.
A sampler is an electronic musical instrument that records and stores audio samples, generally pieces of existing recordings, and plays them back at a range of pitches and speeds. The term sampler is also sometimes used to refer to instruments (keyboards in particular) that store and play back samples, but are incapable of recording them.

There is a significant debate about the value of using live instrumentation for hip hop musical production versus gathering samples from recorded material. Depending on aesthetic tastes, either process is suitable; however, the overall opinion is that the sample needs to sound vintage, worn, recycled. Achieving sampling’s initial popularity around 1986, many DJs utilized the breakbeat or drum solo from other songs as the foundation for new beats, often looped or segmented. The breakbeat, which is the catalyst for the break dancer, is considered the song’s climactic moment. Since hip hop’s early years, countless DJs have pursued the quest to find the perfect breakbeat. DJ Afrika Bambaataa’s 1982 release *Looking for the Perfect Beat* highlights the breakbeat and its musical significance. The actual process of digging through crates and boxes of long-forgotten vinyl records for breakbeats is akin to treasure hunting. Those DJs who find rare and obscure beats guard their sources closely; legendary DJs such as Grandmaster Flash, Kool Herc, and Afrika Bambaataa were known to remove the labels from their vinyl records.

The cost of sampling has become an obstacle for artists on a shoestring budget; sample clearance fees can absorb a substantial proportion of one’s recording budget. Furthermore, because of copyright permissions, lawsuits regarding either unpaid sampling fees or samples used without permission are abundant in the legal system, and the penalties for copyright infringement can be high.

While there are many DJs (who later became producers) who have used the technique of sampling, several have established themselves as leaders in the field. DJ Marley Marl is considered a pioneer in this arena because of his discovery of the drum sound sample: others include Rick Rubin’s efforts fusing classic rock tunes on several Run DMC songs; DJ Pete Rock’s ability to masterfully utilize classic soul samples; Prince Paul’s production on De La Soul’s seminal album *3 Feet High and Rising*, which introduced samples from folk and country music; and Teddy Riley’s ingenuity, which led to the proliferation of the New Jack Swing sound in both hip hop and R&B genres during the 1990s. Also, producer Jermaine Dupri is often hailed as an innovator in the field. Other noteworthy producers are Timbaland, DJ Scratch, the Neptunes, Swizz Beatz, Alchemist, Just Blaze, and Kanye West. Still, the two DJs-turned-producer who are most lauded as iconic figures are Dr. Dre and DJ Premier. Interestingly, representation by women in the DJ-producer role is
Though “Deep Cover,” with its prominent bass line, resumed Efil4zaggin’s sinister atmosphere and minor sonorities, Dr. Dre’s G-funk sound definitely matured on his first solo album, *The Chronic*. This album, which lyrically exalted a gangsta lifestyle epitomized by hedonistic party rhymes, firmly established Dr. Dre’s musical interpolations of the 1970s funk canon (“Atomic Dog” on “Knee Deep,” Donny Hatta way’s “Little Ghetto Boy” on the eponymous title, or Leon Haywood’s “I Wanna Do Something Freaky to You” on “Nuthin’ but a G Thang”). The use of interpolation, a technique that consists of hiring studio musicians to play segments in the studio instead of sampling a song, significantly developed after several rap producers had to face numerous lawsuits about copyright issues (interpolation allows producers to secure the rights to sheet music without having to pay royalties to use the sound recording) Dr. Dre, who admits never having been comfortable with the sampler, had started using this technique and collaborating with studio musicians on *First Round Knock-Out* (on “Cabbage Patch”).

In the wake of *The Chronic*, many rappers emulated Dr. Dre’s G-funk. Local rappers somehow affiliated with him embraced his patented sound and released albums that captured the musical (and lyrical) expression of LA gang banging that he had instituted. Warren G with his album *Regulate . . . G-Funk Era* (1994), Tha Dogg Pound (Dat Nigga Daz and Kurupt) with *Dogg Food* (1995), Ruthless’s Above the Law with *Black Mafia Life* (1993), and the Maad Circle with their album *West Up* (1995) offer representative illustrations of this trend. Nevertheless, the impact of Dre’s G-funk sound was not restricted to California. MC Breed’s album *The New Breed*, produced by the D.O.C. and featuring Warren G, and Scarface’s *The Diary* (1994) adapted G-funk to, respectively, Atlanta and Houston.

For nearly four years, G-funk, with its typically Californian aesthetic, dominated hip hop and significantly influenced the imagery of rap music as we know it today. A new gritty style of East Coast production took hold around the same time, with Wu-Tang Clan’s *Enter the 36 Chambers* (1993), Mobb Deep’s *Infamous* (1995), and Nas’ *Illmatic* (1994) creating sparse, rough and rugged soundscapes that clearly differed from Dre’s multi-layered melodies. This stark difference between East Coast and West Coast style set the stage for the East Coast versus West Coast beef, in which Death Row was a prime player. Dre’s sound became the sound of the West Coast. His productions, for Snoop Doggy Dogg (*Doggystyle*), Blackstreet (“No Diggity”),

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**Further Resources**

2Pac ("California Love"), and various soundtracks (Friday’s "Keep Their Headz Ringin"), productions that consistently glorified street corner activities, insensitive sexual intercourse with frivolous women, and a flamboyant lifestyle, were massive hits. They fashioned a rupture with the dynamic funk and political activism that somewhat prevailed at the time and established rap, which had principally been dance oriented, as automobile music (Dr. Dre maintained that he played some of his demos in his car to make sure they sounded right). The success of his hit single “Let Me Ride” and of the “Still D. R.E.” video greatly contributed to the valorization of the car as a central symbol of rap music. The recurrence of cars in the lyrics of rappers and in their videos, as well as the success of the MTV show Pimp My Ride, hosted by Xzibit, another Dr. Dre protégé for whom the producer used samples of hydraulic systems and bouncing lowriders (on his album Restless), confirm the pronounced relationship between automobiles and rap.

The solid production that Dr. Dre subsequently crafted for Eminem, Xzibit, or 50 Cent were as responsible as the skills of these gifted lyricists for keeping him at the top of the charts. They exhibited a vast array of high-pitched pianos or harpsichords (on Xzibit’s hit single “X” and Eminem’s “Guilty Conscience”), bells and string orchestrations (on The Documentary’s “How We Do”), laid-back melodies, heavy beats, synthesizer sounds (on 50 Cent’s hit single “In da Club” and, more recently, on The Documentary’s “Westside Story”), or clean electric guitars (on 2001’s “Xplosive,” Eve’s “Let Me Blow Ya Mind”), with which Dr. Dre both retained the eerie atmosphere introduced on Efil4zaggin and refined his recognizable signature sound.

This distinctive sound, whether it is supported by prominent kick drums or old-school 808 beats has guaranteed Dr. Dre, through multiple collaborations with major artists (Jay-Z, Mary J. Blige, Ice Cube, 2Pac, etc.) and multiplatinum sales (Eminem’s Slim Shady and Marshall Mathers LPs, Chronic 2001, 50 Cent’s Get Rich or Die Tryin’), an unaltering (and repeatedly recalled) potent symbolic status both in rap discourse and in the field of the production of this music.

THE SNOOP DOGG PERSONA

The prestige and influence of Snoop Dogg in rap are as palpable as those of his mentor Dr. Dre. His famous use of a slang device (originally created by rapper E-40) that consists of substituting an “izz” or “izzle” sound for a syllable has been adopted by several rappers, the most prominent being Jay-Z on his hit single “H.O.V.A.” and Ludacris (on Chingy’s hit single “Holidae Inn”). In the same way, he popularized a dog(g) motif that would be taken up, simultaneously or subsequently, by many other rappers (Nate Dogg, Tha Dogg Pound, Doggy’s Angels, Cypress Hill’s Sen Dog, [Lil’] Bow Wow). Like Dr. Dre, if Snoop Dogg owes some of his importance in rap to his
ties to the streets and to his exaltation of its social practices, he equally derives his status from his aesthetic distinctiveness.

Snoop Dogg’s flow, like Dr. Dre’s signature sound, is distinctively recognizable. When Dr. Dre invited him to feature on “Deep Cover,” the typical rhyme style was characterized by a fast and emphatic delivery, inspired by groups like Das EFX, which concentrated predominantly on the rhythm. On “Deep Cover,” Snoop Dogg introduced a distinctive languid flow that, with its musicality, differed somewhat from the paradigmatic vocal style. Snoop Dogg, like many young blacks from the ghetto, had developed his effortless-sounding MCing on street corners and during his frequent sojourns in jail. The ritual emulation that singularizes these social spaces, accurately portrayed in Kevin Fitzgerald’s documentary _Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme_ (2004), helped him develop a distinctive type of debonair rhyming that would sway Dr. Dre and significantly contribute to the success of their subsequent collaborations (_The Chronic, Chronic 2001_ with its hit singles “Still D.R.E.” and “The Next Episode”), not to mention Snoop’s countless featurings on further releases produced by Dr. Dre (Lady of Rage’s “Afro Puffs,” Eminem’s “Bitch Please II,” and Xzibit’s “DNA”).

Snoop Dogg developed a symbolic persona of his own that greatly contributed to his success. Even though he circumstantially changes aliases, according to the role-playing function of rap, and introduces himself either as Snoop Eastwood/Mister 187 (on “Deep Cover” and “Who Am I [What’s My Name]?”), Mr. Dizzle (on his MTV show), or Bigg Snoop depending on the themes developed in his songs, his Snoop Doggy Dogg persona is primarily presented. The recurrence of this dog motif, in Snoop’s lyrics as well as those of Sen Dog from Cypress Hill, which expressed a similar hedonistic criminal mind, clearly established it, at least in West Coast rap, as a substitute for the long-standing monkey (a key character in various toasts—violent and obscene oral narratives—such as Pool-Shooting Monkey, Party-Time Monkey, and some versions of the Signifying Monkey) as the animal personification of ghetto hustlers. This assertion finds an expressive illustration in the “Who Am I (What’s My Name)” video in which pool-shooting gangstas digitally morph into dogs. Snoop Dogg equally exploited this motif on several occasions throughout his career. For example, he drew extensively on its prolific lexical field. He titled his first album _Doggystyle_, a term that, with its double entendre, simultaneously conveyed sexual innuendo and enlightened listeners on his rhyming style. The noteworthy cartoonlike artwork of this LP, realized by Joe Cool (Darryl Daniel), would considerably influence the design of rap albums (Virginia rappers from the Clipse used a similar visual aesthetic on their LP _Lord Willin’_ ). His second album, _Tha Doggfather_, through an intertextual technique that literary theorist Michael Riffaterre calls ungrammaticality—an orthographic anomaly referring to a preexisting textual reference—symbolically blended his dog persona with the criminal imagery of _The Godfather_, Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola’s mobster trilogy.
This functional dog motif, with its pronounced sexual connotations, is also instrumental in the affirmation of his pimp persona, Bigg Snoop, through which he usually expresses a symbolic supremacy over women (irreverently referred to as “bitches” in the sociolect of the ghetto). The pimp (or mack) possesses an important social status in the streets of black ghettos where the term, used as an adjective, commonly means sharp or beautiful. In rap music, the pimp is a functional representation that enables rappers to synthesize important components of the lifestyle of gangstas, in particular the invariable money, sex, drugs, and alcohol. If terms like gangsta, hustler, pimp, or thug are generally interchangeable in the criminal discourse of rappers, they generally favor a pimp persona when they wish to emphasize their sexual and economic exploitation of women. Rap scholar Eithne Quinn has accurately analyzed this proliferation of pimp imagery in rap lyrics.

Snoop Dogg’s pimp persona, through present in his early albums, has become more apparent in his latest releases under the notable influence of his new guide, Bishop Don Magic Juan, an actual retired pimp who allegedly gave up pimping years ago when he became a Christian. This deliberate adoption of a marketable pimp aesthetic, with its long mink coats, coordinated satin suits, and scantily clad women, capitalized on by blaxploitation films, is especially marked on his albums Paid tha Cost to Be Da Boss (and its singles “From tha Chuuuch to da Palace” and “Beautiful”) and R&G (Rhythm & Gangsta): The Masterpiece. Snoop Dogg’s praised pimp aesthetic, resting on his charismatic personality and his quick sense of humor, precisely exemplifies the attitudinal and discursive expressions of masculinity mentioned earlier, expressions that do not correspond to a “cool pose” or a “code of the street,” as sociologists Majors and Billson and Elijah Anderson have argued respectively, but to a practical rationality shaped by the social restrictions which have altered the roles and socioeconomic status of black lower-class men living in ghetto communities. Bigg Snoop, Snoop Dogg’s pimp persona, precisely exemplifies the allegorical compensation of an inferior status through what Eithne Quinn calls a pimp “lifestylization,” a fabulous representation of pimp lifestyle and iconography. Besides, he conforms to the basic rules of the pimp game described in the novels of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. Physically, he habitually presents himself as a sharp and expensively dressed hustler reminiscent of the blaxploitation films of the early seventies (as in 50 Cent’s “P.I.M.P.” video, for example). As for his moral fiber, he totally despises women, as he indicates lyrically on his pimp anthems “I’m Threw with You” and “Can You Control Your Hoe”—both on R&G (Rhythm & Gangsta): The Masterpiece—and visually in Snoop Dogg’s Doggystyle and Hustlaz: Diary of a Pimp, two pornographic productions in which, with the smooth and laid-back tone of voice symptomatic of the pimp, he expresses no other interest in them than a monetary and functional one.

Snoop Dogg undeniably owes a part of his appeal to the fact that his gangsta personas, especially this pimp character, differ slightly from the
aggressive thug attitude that, with its frequent glorification of muscular bodies and armed or physical brutality, prevails in the ghetto and its representations. His tall and svelte figure and his nonchalant drawl are closer to the characteristics of pimps, whose power resides chiefly in their phlegmatic and verbal skills, than to these of violent and sturdy gangstas who, as formulaic rap videos testify, commonly parade their physical strength.

Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, thanks to the cultural and social capital necessary to succeed in the field of rap music production, and to their artistic peculiarities, hold a prominent and steadfast status both in this field and in rap discourse. With his G-funk, Dr. Dre crafted a sound expressive of LA gang banging and found a perfect representative with Snoop Dogg, a distinctive MC who pioneered or familiarized a unique style and language on which several rappers now trade. Their numerous collaborations with equally celebrated artists and producers helped them to remain major forces in a highly competitive field where status is intimately linked to record sales and street credibility.

See also: Ice Cube, Eminem, Kanye West, Tupac Shakur

WORKS CITED


FURTHER RESOURCES

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Nasir Jones, born September 14, 1973, entered the rap scene at what many consider to be the end of the genre’s golden age. Between 1988 and 1993, old schoolers were still producing classic work while a younger generation was infusing a variety of new styles and perspectives. Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys continued to produce beat-heavy party music. Meanwhile, tougher voices were beginning to be heard with the introduction of gangsta rap (e.g., Schoolly D’s “P.S.K. (What Does It Mean),” Ice-T’s “Six in the Morning,” N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton*) and hard-hitting political rap (e.g., Public...
A collection of artists known as the Native Tongues Posse took an Afrocentric focus, with artists including A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, and Queen Latifah delivering lyrics full of black pride, references to the motherland, and a playful spirit. Musical experimentation had always been a feature of hip hop, and shifts in lyrical focus were accompanied by a broadening of musical influences. With *The Chronic*, Dr. Dre created the G-funk sound, in which often-harsh images and language were accompanied by irresistible seventies-style horns and bass. Meanwhile, many Native Tongues artists incorporated jazz rhythms and instrumentation on their tracks.

Young Nasir Jones took it all in. His classrooms were the parks, stoops, and street corners of New York’s Queensbridge housing projects, the largest public housing structure in North America. Here, he interacted with members of the Juice Crew, including DJ Marley Marl, MC Shan, and Intelligent Hoodlum. The variety and richness of rap’s golden age combined with Queensbridge’s hip hop heritage and its often violent streets in the young Nas to produce his universally lauded first album, *Illmatic*. If Nas’s career had ended with *Illmatic*, he would have been ensured a notable place in hip hop history. Yet his career continues, and it is the details of that career that make him an undeniable icon. Nas’s attention-grabbing debut was followed by bigger-selling follow-ups that drew less critical praise, then an artistic comeback driven by one of hip hop’s legendary beefs. Through it all, Nas has maintained a consistent commitment to lyrical and musical experimentation.

**CHILDHOOD INFLUENCES**

Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones (*bin* means *son of*) comes by his musical talent honestly. Nas has music in his genes. His father is the jazz trumpeter, guitarist, and singer Olu Dara (born Charles Jones III), and Dara’s father and grandfather were both singers in Natchez, Mississippi, where he was raised. Nas added to his musical lineage a raw intelligence, an impressive vocabulary, a gift for keen observation, and a remarkable ability with rhyme, imagery, and narrative. Olu Dara made his living traveling the world with various jazz ensembles, yet although Nas’s parents divorced when he was twelve, the child visited Dara in his Harlem home regularly. During these visits, the two would waste little time getting down to making music. Nas was playing the trumpet by age four, and the two might also jam on the drums or guitars Dara had around the house. While Dara was, and continues to be, a strong personal and artistic influence on his son, Nas’s lyrics make clear that it was his mother, Ann Jones, who provided her children with a sense of stability, self-worth, and love. The fact that Nas had positive relationships with both of his parents, and was constantly encouraged and supported by them, probably explains a good deal about Nas the man’s own relative stability, responsibility, and equilibrium. Nas lived with his older brother, Jabari (aka Jungle,
a member of rap group the Bravehearts, who have appeared on several Nas songs) and his mother. His father was often on the road playing music, leaving Ann Jones as the boys’ primary caretaker. Nas refers to the strain this put on his mother in the song “Poppa Was a Playa” from *The Lost Tapes* (2002).

Nas’s artistic tendencies appeared early. Along with his childhood interest in music, he also wrote short stories and created his own comic books. By early adolescence, he had taken to educating himself, studying African history and the Bible and perusing books at the library to collect new vocabulary for his rhymes. Nas’s trademark complexity was already present at this early point in his life. He was reading, writing, and learning about Five Percenter beliefs at the same time that he was starting to smoke marijuana, commit petty crimes, and sell drugs under the name “Nasty Nas,” one of the many aliases he would use as a rapper. He dropped out of school in early ninth grade, around the time his parents split up. His problems with school are briefly recounted in the 2004 song “Bridging the Gap,” in which Nas raps about spending classroom time drawing caricatures of his teachers and writing rhymes, and having his father called to school when he got in trouble. Like a number of other rappers (e.g., dead prez in “They Schools,” Kanye West in “We Don’t Care,” and Masta Killa in “School”), Nas would later make the point in his lyrics that though he loved learning, much of the school curriculum seemed irrelevant to him as a young, poor, urban, black male.

During his early adolescence, Nas became deeply enmeshed in all aspects of hip hop culture. He joined a b-boy posse called Breakin’ in Action (B.I.A.), dancing under the name Kid Wave, which was also the name he tagged on walls as a graffiti writer. He rapped with a crew called the Devastatin’ Seven. He briefly aspired to DJing, inspired by the example of fellow Queensbridge native and hip hop legend Marley Marl. Nas’s partner in crime during these years was William “Ill Will” Graham, who lived in the apartment directly above him. In Will’s bedroom, the two would play with rhymes and beats, Will playing the DJ with his turntables and mixer. In 1992, the same year that Nas got his first record contract, Will and Nas’s brother Jabari were both shot after a Queensbridge party. While Jabari recovered from his leg injury, Will’s wounds proved fatal. Losing his best friend had an intense effect on the young Nas, who has honored Will’s memory through ubiquitous shout-outs on songs and through the name of his publishing imprint, Ill Will Records. Nas has said that as a youngster, he viewed the experiences he was having and seeing in Queensbridge as a movie; there is an undeniable narrative quality to the timing of both his signing and Will’s death, which together seem to mark the end of the artist’s childhood.

**MAJOR LABEL RELEASES**

There are certain stories that every long-term hip hop fan knows: how Kool Herc kicked it all off by setting up his speakers in a Bronx park, how Sylvia
Robinson of Sugar Hill Records went searching for local rappers to capitalize on the new craze, and how Suge Knight bailed Tupac out of jail and signed him to Death Row Records. In the same vein is the emergence of Nas on the New York scene. The fifteen-year-old newcomer had been introduced to Queens-based Large Professor, who was part of a group called Main Source and whose grand moniker belied the fact that the busy producer was only seventeen years old and still attending high school while producing songs for the likes of Eric B. & Rakim and Kool G Rap in his home studio. Nas spent time at Large Professor’s home, taking in the production process and occasionally recording his own rhymes when a scheduled rapper didn’t show up. When it was time for Main Source to record its debut album, *Breaking Atoms*, Large Professor invited Nas to contribute a verse on the song “Live at the Barbeque.” The album was well received; fans and critics alike were particularly excited about Nas’s guest verse.

Meanwhile, Def Jam artist 3rd Bass was breaking up (see sidebar: 3rd Bass). The group’s two white MCs, Pete Nice and MC Serch, both would record solo albums. Serch also moved into a new career as a producer and was

**3rd Bass**  
*Susan Weinstein*

While the white, Jewish Beastie Boys had established a successful career in the primarily black world of rap during the mid-eighties, 3rd Bass came along at a time when Afrocentrism—of both the warm-and-fuzzy and militant varieties—was becoming a central trope of the genre. Respected for their skills, the group was nonetheless targeted by the intensely political group X-Clan, who accused 3rd Bass’s record company of trying to pass the group off as black. How to racially categorize a group that is two thirds white (MC Serch and Pete Nice) and one third black (DJ Richie Rich) is itself an intriguing question that reveals the fundamental flaws of racial thinking. 3rd Bass were themselves sensitive to the racial politics of rap, and they recognized Vanilla Ice’s hip hop posturing and false claims to ghetto credibility as problematic. Their second album, *Derelicts of Dialect*, features the song “Pop Goes the Weasel,” which directly targets Vanilla Ice in order to distance the group from his co-optation of rap.

3rd Bass worked closely with established black artists such as producer Prince Paul (of De La Soul and Stetsasonic fame), and up-and-coming group KMD. KMD’s Zev Love X (who would later perform as the masked rapper MF DOOM) provided a guest verse for 3rd Bass’s first single “The Gas Face,” the video for which features prominent black artists like Erick Sermon of EPMD. Aligning themselves with established hip hop artists, 3rd Bass used the song to criticize MC Hammer for being a pop crossover.

3rd Bass was MC Serch (born Michael Berrin), Prime Minister Pete Nice (born Pete Nash), and DJ Richie Rich (born Richard Lawson). Signed to Def
Jam soon after the Beastie Boys left the label in 1988, 3rd Bass targeted the Beasties on the well-received *Cactus Album*. The Beastie Boys issued a delayed response on “Professor Booty” (from 1992’s *Check Your Head*). While the Beastie Boys don’t mention 3rd Bass by name, MCA’s verse appears to take on the group as a whole and specifically mock Serch’s dancing (“Dancing around like you think you’re Janet Jackson”). After two albums, 3rd Bass disbanded, with Nice and Rich continuing to record and perform together. Serch put out one solo album before turning his focus to production.

3rd Bass is regularly acknowledged by aspiring white rappers as a positive model. D12 member Proof (DeShaun Holton), who as Eminem’s onstage hype man knew something about the potentials and pitfalls facing white rappers, said of Serch, “He was there before the struggle of even today’s top artists. He had to fight. 3rd Bass and the Beastie Boys showed that hip hop can show racial harmony” (Garner).

**Work Cited**


**Discography**


looking to work with new artists. Serch drove to Queensbridge to find Nas, the rapper behind that “Live at the Barbeque” verse. When Serch discovered that Nas was still unsigned, he called a representative at Sony Records, who offered Nas a contract. Serch invited Nas to contribute a song to the soundtrack he was producing for the movie *Zebrahead*; this song, “Halftime,” became the soundtrack’s first single and appears on Nas’s acclaimed first album, *Illmatic* (1994).

*Illmatic* earned its place in hip hop history by being the first album ever awarded five microphones out of five from *The Source*, at the time the premier rap magazine. The first track is more aural montage than song. “The Genesis” starts off with the sound of an elevated train and an almost-inaudible voice rhyming beneath it. Over these sounds, a snatch of dialogue, two men arguing. In this brief montage, Nas tells us everything he wants us to know about him. The train is shorthand for New York; the barely discernible rap is, in fact, his “Live at the Barbeque” verse; and the dialogue comes from *Wild Style*, one of the earliest movies to focus on hip hop culture. Each of
these is a point of genesis. New York for Nas as a person, “Live at the Barbeque” for Nas the rapper, and *Wild Style*, symbolically at least, for hip hop itself. These are my roots, Nas was saying, and he proceeded to demonstrate exactly what those roots had yielded.

*Illmatic’s* impact comes from its particular combination of theme and artistry. The setting is New York City: its streets, jails, and low-rent apartments. Fittingly, the first full song on the album is “N.Y. State of Mind.” The title seems an ironic reference to older, more romanticized views of the city, but Nas sounds respectful when he refers to earlier songs of the same title by Frank Sinatra and Billy Joel (Nas would release a new song of the same name on his mixtape *Carry the Cross Vol. 1*, which would feature a sped-up sample of the Billy Joel song). While “N.Y. State of Mind” fills listeners’ heads with images of violence and drugs, Nas’s New York is not all dark. The album moves back and forth between experiences of pain and pleasure, frustration and nostalgia. This dialectic is at work as we move from the first track’s image of the city as “a maze full of black rats trapped” to the second song’s promise to the residents of those mazes that “the world is yours.” The latter phrase is used in the film *Scarface*, where it resonates with the promise of material wealth but also with the implied warning that an uncontrolled ambition may ultimately lead to destruction, as it did for Tony Montana, aka Scarface. *Illmatic’s* success lies in these layers of irony and contradiction. Nas’s braggadocio is on display here, but so is a love for home (“Memory Lane”), a fierce commitment to friends (“One Love”), and stark, painful images of the symptoms of urban poverty. A little girl gets shot in the head, a mother cries for her jailed son, a young man fills himself so full of drugs that he doesn’t know if he’s shot any of the children he remembers seeing during his criminal rampage.

The other thing that sets *Illmatic* apart is the production. Although MC Serch was the executive producer of the album, five different producers worked on various songs. Large Professor, Pete Rock, Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest, DJ Premier of Gang Starr, and L.E.S. each contributed production work to the album. Despite the then-unusual decision to use multiple producers, the album has a consistent sound. Powerful beats combine with horns on one song, with a marimba on another. “It Ain’t Hard to Tell” samples Michael Jackson’s “Human Nature.” On “Life’s a Bitch,” rapper AZ contributes an accomplished opening verse, and Olu Dara plays the song out with a bittersweet solo. The result of so much talent coming together for one ten-track LP could hardly have resulted in anything less striking than *Illmatic*. For better and for worse, Nas had set a nearly impossible standard for everyone, himself included, to live up to.

The Nas albums that followed outsold *Illmatic*, even as their reception was clouded by comparisons to Nas’s debut. *It Was Written* (1996), Nas’s second album, went double platinum. It was generally well received by critics, went to number one on the charts, and had hits with “If I Ruled the World,”
featuring Lauryn Hill, and “Street Dreams,” which samples the Eurythmics’ hit “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This).” Nas continued his lyrical innovation with the song “I Gave You Power,” a narrative about a gun told from the gun’s perspective. “Affirmative Action” and “The Set Up” feature members of the Firm, Nas’s Dr. Dre-produced group that included Foxy Brown, AZ, and Cormega (rapper Nature would replace original member and former Nas associate Cormega, who was mentioned on Illmatic’s “One Love” after he and Nas had a falling out). The Firm would release its one full album in 1997, then disband after disappointing sales. The production on It Was Written was smoother and less gritty than Illmatic. Nas went with one producer, the production team of Trackmasters Entertainment. The album sold well, produced hit songs, and garnered Nas many new fans, even as Illmatic diehards began what would be an ongoing murmur of concern about Nas’s stylistic departure from his classic debut.

1999’s I Am . . . came next, again going double platinum. DJ Premier and L.E.S., two of the producers from Illmatic, returned and contributed several songs, as did Trackmasters, who produced It Was Written. “Nas Is Like” and “Hate Me Now” (featuring Puff Daddy) were both released as singles. The Premier-produced “Nas Is Like,” the first single from the album, samples lines from Illmatic as the rapper runs through a long list of similes. “Hate Me Now” is an angry, insistent response to the criticism Nas had experienced after the success of his first album. In the song, Nas attributes to envy the complaints that he had sold out or was chasing success in too calculated a fashion: “It’s a fine line between paper [money] and hate.” While Puff Daddy was a curious choice for a guest appearance (even then, Puff was more entrepreneur than rapper), Nas says that he was motivated to collaborate with Puffy as a gesture to the memory of Biggie Smalls, the flagship artist on Diddy’s Bad Boy label until his death. The other guests are more fitting: DMX and Scarface each make an appearance, adding their lyrical facility and street-based perspectives to “Life Is What You Make It” and “Favor for a Favor,” respectively. Originally, I Am . . . was supposed to be a double album. However, much of disc two was bootlegged (an early case of MP3 leaks), so only disc one was released. This wasn’t the only drama surrounding the album; in the video for “Hate Me Now” both Nas and Puffy originally appear on crucifixes. Puff Daddy had second thoughts about the scene and asked that it be cut, but the wrong edit was sent to MTV, which aired it in its entirety. As a result, Puff Daddy and his bodyguards barged into the office of Nas’s manager, Steve Stoute, attacking him and, at one point, hitting him over the head with a champagne bottle. Stoute sued, and the case was settled out of court.

Nastradamus, also released in 1999, is widely considered to be Nas’s artistic low point. It sold well, but its quality reflects the fact that it was written and recorded in only four months, after Nas decided not to include the bootlegged I Am . . . songs on the album (some of these songs were finally released
on 2002’s *The Lost Tapes*, a compilation of Nas’s previously unreleased material). Nas has acknowledged that this album was a departure from his other work, saying, “*Nastradamus* was just me experimenting, into some dark world, I don’t know what” (Jones, *Video Anthology*). Nas’s rhyming skills remain strong, but some of the sung choruses on songs such as “*Nastradamus*” lack energy. The music on several of the songs verges on easy listening-style jazz. The single “*U Owe Me*,” featuring R&B singer Ginuwine and an electronic dance beat, provided perhaps the best ammunition to date for critics and fans who feared that Nas was sacrificing artistry for popular success. The album didn’t lack talented producers: DJ Premier and L.E.S. were on board once again, as was Timbaland, who has since made his reputation producing hits for Missy Elliott, among others. Dame Grease, who produced one song on *I Am ...*, produced four cuts here. The album opens and closes with performances by spoken word poet Jessica Care Moore, although the ethereal musical accompaniment distracts from Moore’s words, much as the music and production do throughout.

By the time Nas’s fourth studio album came out, much had changed. His relationship with the mother of his daughter was in trouble, and his own mother had been diagnosed with cancer. To top it off, Jay-Z launched a lyrical attack with “The Takeover” from his album *The Blueprint*. Combined, the result of these challenges was to bring Nas back to top form. Released toward the end of 2001, *Stillmatic* was heralded by critics and fans alike as the follow-up to its namesake that they had been waiting for since 1994. Once again, *The Source* awarded a Nas album five mics, although other reviews didn’t necessarily reach that level of praise. Despite the negativity of Jay-Z’s attack, it seemed to have gotten Nas’s juices flowing. He matches his rival song for song, with biting attacks on “Ether” and “*Got Ur Self a Gun*,” which borrows its music from HBO’s hit mob show *The Sopranos*, and which Jay-Z’s next Nas dis, “*Supa Ugly*,” would sample. He also used the album to address beefs with old neighborhood friends: “*Destroy and Rebuild*” takes aim at Prodigy of Mobb Deep and at former associate Cormega. In this song, Nas reworks Boogie Down Productions’ old Queensbridge-knocking Juice Crew dis song, “The Bridge Is Over” (see the Roxanne Shanté essay for more on the BDP/Juice Crew beef) and turns it into a chorus about cleaning house in Queensbridge. Also on this album is the single “*One Mic*,” in which each verse builds in intensity until Nas is screaming out the words, only to be undercut by the quiet, almost tender refrain.

*God’s Son* (2002), Nas’s next release, reflects an artist sobered by the death of his beloved mother, Ann Jones. Nas returns to her again and again throughout the disc, culminating with the song “*Dance*,” a simple, heartfelt expression of a son’s love and loss. “*Made You Look*,” the first single, features a driving loop under Nas’s relentless delivery; the chorus is a playful insistence on the power of words. It begins with the sound of a gunshot; several voices shout in unison, “*They shootin’*,” to which Nas responds,
“Ah, made you look.” This brief exchange is a reminder that speech is not an alternative to action, but at its most forceful, is itself a form of action. This perspective reflects and perhaps explains the manner in which Nas has conducted his various professional beefs, which is always to keep the battles verbal. The album produced Nas’s biggest single to date with “I Can,” a motivational song for children built around the melody of Beethoven’s “Für Elise.” Also tucked away on God’s Son is a hint of the political turn Nas would take on his next release, the song “Revolutionary Warfare,” which, however, features a much more overtly political verse from guest artist Lake, who name checks sixties Black Power leaders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton.

That political sensibility becomes central on disc one of 2004’s double-CD Street’s Disciple, which features songs like “American Way” and “These Are Our Heroes,” which takes to task black actors and athletes whom Nas accuses of being disconnected from their roots and culture. Disc two reflects yet another development in Nas’s personal life, this time his marriage to R&B singer Kelis, to whom he devotes several songs. Nas also takes the unusual step of singing on this disc, on a song for his daughter Destiny. Listening to this song, one can’t help but be reminded of Eminem’s “Hailey’s Song,” on which the Detroit rapper sings to his own daughter. There are two standout songs on disc two, “Thief’s Theme,” on which Nas raps over the driving rhythm of Iron Butterfly’s rock classic “In-a-Gadda-da-Vida,” and “Bridging the Gap,” Nas’s duet with his father (see sidebar: Hip Hop and the Blues).

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**Hip Hop and the Blues**

*Susan Weinstein*

“Bridging the gap from the blues and jazz to rap,” Nas rhymes on a 2004 song featuring his father, jazz trumpeter Olu Dara. The gap Nas names in his song is more an issue of awareness than of musical reality. In fact, the blues predict rap in style, subject matter, and attitude. Like rap, the blues is a form powerfully inflected by the working-class experience. Because of this, both the blues and rap have, in their times, been the targets of criticism by middle-class African Americans who view the themes of overt sexuality, alcohol, drugs, and crime as at best unproductive and at worst reinforcing of stereotypical images of blacks as hypersexual and uncontrolled.

Born in the rural south before spreading to the cities, the blues reflected both country and urban realities. Performers’ lived experiences with work, love, and sex provided the basic subject matter for the blues, which is, like rap, primarily a genre of personal narrative. Female performers were often overtly sexual, expressing through both lyrics and delivery a power and desire starkly at odds with middle-class notions of femininity. Female rappers like Lil’ Kim and Trina are clear descendants of such women.
Both blues and hip hop have also infused new vocabulary—or, sometimes, new meanings for old words—into the English language. Much blues lingo—for example, *mojo*, *creeping*, *jive*, *boogie*, and even *rock*, which was first used as a musical reference in blues—has now become so much a part of American English that we no longer recall the words’ origins or early connotations.

Further Resources


Through form and content, “Bridging the Gap” draws connections among the many movements in African American music. As striking as the song is artistically, however, it is also unique because it depicts a functional relationship between a black father and son, something rarely represented in hip hop songs. The song, and the publicity that accompanied it, focus on this relationship. Nas says the absence of fathers from the lives of many black youths was a motivation for the song: “We had to make this record as an example for the kids whose fathers were either shot down in the street or taken down by the prison systems or drugs” (Foster 50), to show them that there are other models that these youths can follow with their own children.

The duo’s performance of “Bridging the Gap” on the 2005 VH1 Hip Hop Honors broadcast captured the power implicit in the song and provided additional visual layers. The performance featured Nas striding the stage while Olu Dara leans on a stool, playing his horn and singing his blues refrain. Nas is dressed for the occasion in a dark suit, yet still sporting his trademark off-kilter baseball cap. Father and son play off each other, exchanging glances, Olu Dara at times appearing to sing directly to Nas, the two exchanging the line “You’re the greatest” to each other during one refrain (see sidebar: The Father Figure in Hip Hop). Equally striking is the moment when Nas walks over to the corner of the stage, above which are seated the show’s honorees. He looks up at them, and we see KRS-One and Chuck D out of their seats, rocking to the music, KRS-One with a broad smile on his face. In the midst of rapping, never missing a beat, Nas lifts his cap and offers a formal bow to his predecessors.

VIDEOS AND COVER ART

Nas came of age as an artist at a time when the music video had already come into its own as both an art form and a potent commercial force. Consistent with the trajectory of his music, Nas’s videos started out low-tech, grainy, and local, and became progressively slicker in look and theme before turning back
toward simpler settings and styles. Along the way, Nas collaborated with top directors, often using his videos to reinforce his central grounding in hip hop culture and his ongoing commitment to home. Two of the three *Illmatic* videos, and some from *It Was Written*, were filmed on location in the Queensbridge Projects. On the DVD commentary accompanying the video for “If I Ruled the World,” Nas mocks this early tendency, saying, “I had to like get my head together, smack myself one day, say listen, stop shooting the videos in your projects, you gotta stop one day, because every video was seeming the same.” At the same time, this early positioning is important in establishing Nas as an artist firmly grounded in the hood’s apartments, parks, streets, and corners. The videos for “One Love,” “Half-time,” “Nas Is Like,” and “The World Is Yours” in particular provide visual references for the world that Nas describes in so many of his songs.

*Illmatic*’s “It Ain’t Hard to Tell,” directed by Ralph McDaniels of TV’s *Video Music Box*, became Nas’s first official video. Using three different New York settings, the video portrays a young, chip-toothed rapper onstage in a small Manhattan club, hanging with friends on Coney Island, and performing the Father Figure in Hip Hop

*Mickey Hess*

Naughty by Nature’s “Ghetto Bastard” opens with scripted dialogue between a doctor and nurse in a maternity ward. The nurse informs the doctor that there is no father to include on a newborn’s birth certificate, and the doctor describes the situation as “not a shame, a problem.” Hip hop lyrics are full of stories about absentee fathers, from Ghostface Killah’s “All That I Got (Is You)” to Tupac’s “Dear Mama,” to Kanye West’s “Hey Mama,” to 50 Cent’s verse on the Game’s “Hate It or Love It,” which includes the line, “Daddy ain’t around, probably out committing felonies.” These songs tend to celebrate the mother’s strength in raising her kids alone, and to present the father as weak for abandoning his responsibility. Nas’s collaboration with his father Olu Dara on “Bridging the Gap” is unusual in a music genre where many stars may have little to no relationship with their fathers.

Many of the same rappers who discuss growing up without a dad also depict themselves as caring and responsible fathers. Ghostface, who, on “All That I Got (Is You),” describes his father packing up and moving out when Ghost was six years old, brings his own son onstage to perform with him in concert footage from the DVD *Put It on the Line*. The Game’s video for “Hate It or Love It,” which opens with 50 Cent’s verse about his absentee dad, ends with the Game holding a baby. Will Smith and Eminem have dedicated songs to their children, and Wu-Tang Clan frequently features their children in skits between songs, and have recently, in the cases of Ghostface Killah and GZA, helped their sons launch their own rap careers.
at a hip hop landmark. This last is the park that served as the final scene for the movie *Wild Style*, which as mentioned above was one of the earliest movies to portray New York hip hop culture and which Nas drew on in the opening cut of *Illmatic*, “The Genesis.” The rapper says that being able to shoot on the stage at the park was “real serious for me.”

The “One Love” video continued the connection to *Wild Style* through the history of its director, Fab 5 Freddy, who appeared in the movie and was one of the earliest hip hop promoters (he is name checked by Debbie Harry in her band Blondie’s 1980 punk-rap song “Rapture”). The video was shot on location in Queensbridge and at a prison in New Jersey, where Nas brought his friends to portray inmates shooting baskets and staring out of jail cells. The brief opening scene of the video resonates with stories that early friends, and Nas himself, have told about the nascent artist; we see Nas leaning out of an apartment window, watching as a young man is chased down and arrested by several police officers. The scene presents Nas as primarily an observer and chronicler of street life, witnessing the traps in which so many of his peers were being caught and using his lyrical ability and intellect to contextualize these lives for listeners.

The video for *It Was Written*’s “If I Ruled the World” provides a segue from the early, gritty, street-style Nas to the more refined and worldly artist he was in the process of becoming. This video marks the beginning of an ongoing collaboration with video director Hype Williams, who would also direct “Street Dreams” and “Hate Me Now,” and who would direct Nas and rapper DMX in the feature-length movie *Belly*. We once again encounter Nas in his Queensbridge Projects, but the clothing of Nas and his crew (AZ and Cormega of the Firm are featured) now sports designer labels, and Lauryn Hill, who provided the chorus for the song, is shown singing while riding through the streets of New York, standing up in the sunroof, the colors and speed providing a polished sensation different from the earlier videos in which Nas and his crew roam the city on foot, blowing into their hands to ward off the deep cold of a New York winter.

By the “Street Dreams” video (also from *It Was Written*), Queensbridge is nowhere in sight. This time, the setting is Las Vegas, and we see the most conceptual treatment yet of a Nas song. The plot is borrowed directly from *Casino*, Martin Scorsese’s Vegas crime drama starring Robert DeNiro, Sharon Stone, and Joe Pesci. Frank Vincent, who appeared in the movie, also appears in the video, and Nas credits Vincent with coaching him on his performance.

By the time Nas’s third album, *I Am* … was released, the backlash against the artist was in full swing. Nas responded with the song “Hate Me Now,” which would serve as the basis for one of his most notorious videos. If the video for “Street Dreams” was high concept, then the one for “Hate Me Now” was literally biblical in scope. The video featured Nas rapping while hanging on a cross. Prior to the shoot, Nas had gotten a tattoo reading *God’s*
Son across his stomach, which made his comparisons of himself to Jesus Christ even bolder. Puff Daddy, who is featured on the song and in the video, originally also appeared hanging on a cross. After Puff Daddy changed his mind, his crucifixion was later cut from the video, which now begins with a disclaimer noting that “thousands upon thousands” were crucified in ancient times and ends by saying that “Nas believes in the Lord Jesus Christ and this video is in no way a depiction or portrayal of his life or death.” Commenting on the video, Nas stands by it as “a great video,” while acknowledging that “a lot of mess followed it” (Jones, Video Anthology).

By Stillmatic, Nas was working with new video directors, and the results were striking. The video for “One Mic” features Nas sitting in an empty room on a simple chair for the hook; by the end, he is marching through a riot among locals and police in what appears to be an unnamed African town (apartheid-era South African townships come to mind), though in fact the scenes were shot in Los Angeles due to time constraints and unrest in the planned African locations. “Got Ur Self a Gun” features reenactments of the events leading up to the murders of both Tupac and Biggie, with Nas sitting in for each. To Nas’s way of thinking, the video was an homage to two artists whose loss he was still mourning, and a way of preserving their memories. The idea came from director Benny Boom, and Nas admits that he himself was at first “real hesitant” about doing it, but “then I was like, nah, I’m gonna rep for them. They deserve that. I’m gonna acknowledge them as one of their disciples, and them one of my disciples, and we’re the same family” (Jones, Video Anthology).

For God’s Son’s “Made You Look” video, Nas returned to the New York streets and to street style. Working again with Benny Boom, the two created a very different video from “Got Ur Self a Gun.” While the quality of production is high, the feel is old school. Sporting khaki jacket and hat and a single chain, Nas raps in shifting settings; old English-style tags identify each neighborhood: Brooklyn, Queens, Harlem, the Bronx. Local stars turned up for the shooting; among others, Fat Joe appears standing in front of a mural of his close friend, deceased rapper Big Pun, whom Nas references in the song’s lyrics. These scenes are interspersed with black-and-white concert footage of Nas performing in a small club, the audience surrounding him, waving their hands and jumping up and down in time to the beats.

While Nas’s videos are stylistically diverse, his other main visual medium, the album cover, has been almost uniform in its imagery. All of Nas’s solo albums prior to Street’s Disciple feature a single photograph of the rapper on the cover; indeed, among these albums, all but God’s Son feature a picture of Nas against a Queensbridge backdrop (albeit, in the case of I Am . . . , a pharaohed-out version)—God’s Son shows Nas against a simple blue background. Street’s Disciple departs from this tradition by presenting a version of the last supper, with Nas posing as every character in the scene. This isn’t the first time Nas has posed as Jesus (as mentioned above, he appears on the cross
in the video for “Hate Me Now”). Here, though, the iconography suggests that Nas is both Christ and Judas, as well as everyone in between. For the artist who proclaimed on his first public verse, “When I was twelve, I went to hell for snuffin’ Jesus,” who tattooed the words *God’s Son* on his stomach and years later used the phrase as an album title, the image makes sense.

**ARTISTIC INFLUENCES**

The esteem with which fans and critics hold Nas’s skills as a rapper is reflected in the fact that the artist to whom he is most often compared is Rakim, who secured his legendary status while recording as half of the duo Eric B. & Rakim from 1987 to 1992. It is hard to find a list of top ten MCs that does not include Rakim. Old-school rapper Kool Moe Dee puts Rakim at number two of all time in his book *There’s a God on the Mic: The True 50 Greatest MCs* (number one is reserved for Melle Mel, who rapped with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and delivered the genre-changing lyrics on that group’s “The Message”). Like Nas, Rakim comes from musical stock. He is the nephew of blues legend Ruth Brown. He is credited with nothing less than revolutionizing lyrical style through both the complexity of his rhymes and the tone and style of his delivery. When other rappers were shouting their verses, Rakim’s voice remained deep and cool. Interestingly, while Rakim is universally considered one of the greatest MCs in hip hop history, the content of his rhymes has relatively little to do with that reputation. In his heyday, Rakim rapped primarily about his own skills, but he did it more poetically than perhaps anyone before him. On *Street’s Disciple*, Nas paid direct homage to the master on the song “U.B.R. (Unauthorized Biography of Rakim),” referring to Rakim’s calculated rhyme style and crediting him and Eric B. with “invent[ing] a new sound.”

Of course, Nas didn’t need to look as far as Rakim’s native Long Island for models. Queensbridge was full of them when he was growing up. Marley Marl was, and his Juice Crew were a New York staple for Nas’s generation of hip hoppers. In the late seventies and early eighties, Marley was playing parties in the park and honing his skills in an internship with experienced producer Arthur Baker. In 1984, he became the record-spinning sidekick to Mr. Magic, host of *Rap Attack*, a now-legendary New York radio show airing on Friday and Saturday nights. At the time, Kurtis Blow was rap’s star producer, but playing Blow’s pop- and synth-tinged records on the air made Marley want to rebel. Off the air, he began producing his own records in his sister’s Queensbridge living room, developing a gritty sound that diverged from Blow’s clean productions. He also pioneered the drum sample (looping drum segments from old records to create the beats for new songs), which provided him an alternative to the clean drum machine sounds being used at the time.
Marley Marl needed MCs to record songs that would showcase his new techniques. He organized the Juice Crew, who in short order would put Queensbridge on the hip hop map. The original members were Roxanne Shante, MC Shan, Biz Markie, and Big Daddy Kane, with Kool G Rap & DJ Polo, Craig G., Tragedy (aka Intelligent Hoodlum), and Masta Ace joining later. Under Marley’s production, Shante recorded “Roxanne’s Revenge,” the legendary response to U.T.F.O.’s boy-brag song “Roxanne, Roxanne.” Meanwhile, MC Shan recorded “The Bridge,” which would start a style war with the South Bronx’s Boogie Down Productions, also known as KRS-One and DJ Scott La Rock. Biz Markie would become known as rap’s class clown, while Big Daddy Kane developed a smooth, upscale image that won him many female fans.

It makes sense that of the four original Juice Crew MCs, Nas would gravitate primarily to MC Shan, who had the most straightforward style (at least among the males of the crew). In addition, the story of “The Bridge” puts Nas’s continual repping of Queensbridge into historical hip hop context. Now that the term regional in hip hop refers to areas of the country or the world, the neighborhood representing of New York rappers is a shout-out to the old days and the now-legends who started it all.

The other major Juice Crew influence Nas cites was a later addition to Marley Marl’s stable. Intelligent Hoodlum, aka Tragedy Khadafi, performed primarily political raps such as “Arrest the President” and “No Justice, No Peace.” Tragedy’s lyrics reflect the kinds of unusual vocabulary and creative rhyming that are common to Nas’s rhymes. Unknown to Tragedy, a young Nas used to look over his shoulder as he would sit outside in the neighborhood writing in his rhyme book; during the recording of “Da Bridge 2001,” Nas told Tragedy that he remembered how Tragedy would put slashes at the end of each written line. Perhaps most telling of Tragedy’s influence on Nas as a young artist is the fact that the title of his first album is taken from a song on the Intelligent Hoodlum LP. In “The Rebel,” Tragedy flows, “Forget ill, I get illmatical.”

In late 2000, Nas produced an album representing the best of Queensbridge hip hop, called QB’s Finest. “Da Bridge 2001” features an all-star cast in an update of the MC Shan/Marley Marl song “The Bridge.” Nas’s version features Capone, Mobb Deep, Tragedy, Nature, MC Shan, Marley Marl, Cormega, and Millennium Thug. Here, Nas takes the opportunity to bring his generation of artists together with the generation that, to a large extent, spawned them.

In turn, Nas has either influenced or directly supported countless artists. Once he gained a level of attention and success with the release of Illmatic, Nas immediately began contributing guest verses to the albums of other up-and-coming New Yorkers, including fellow Queensbridge natives Mobb Deep and close friend AZ. He rapped on Juice Crew member Kool G Rap’s “Fast Life” on the album 4, 5, 6, and Wu-Tang Clan member Raekwon’s “Verbal Intercourse” from the album Only Built 4 Cuban Linx, becoming the first
non-Wu-Tang member to appear on one of their albums. Nas has supported
his brother Jabari’s (aka Jungle’s) group Bravehearts, appearing on their 1998
debut album and including them on the 2001 collection QB’s Finest. In the
late nineties, Nas created the Firm, with old friends AZ and Cormega (AZ
contributed a verse to “Life’s a Bitch” from Illmatic; Cormega is name
checked on “One Love” from the same album) and new discovery Foxy
Brown. When relations between Nas and Cormega soured, the latter was
replaced by school friend Nature. While the Bravehearts connection has
lasted, the Firm disbanded amid unenthusiastic reception of their solo album.

Identifying Nas’s artistic descendants is more difficult—Nas has joined
Rakim and KRS-One as standard points of comparison any time a new rapper
emerges who demonstrates an unusual gift for combining meaningful subject
matter and lyrical innovation. Eminem is among Nas’s artistic descendants;
he has acknowledged his artistic debt to Nas on several occasions, including
in the song “Till I Collapse” from his 2002 release, The Eminem Show, where
he ranks Nas at number eight on his list of MCs, putting himself just behind
him at number nine. Eminem reiterated and expanded on this list in accepting
his Grammy for Best Rap Album on February 23, 2003, saying that these
MCs “inspired me to bring me where I am today, ’cause honestly, I wouldn’t
be here without them.” Reflecting a mutual admiration, Nas invited Eminem
to produce the song “Carry the Cross” on God’s Son; Nas also contributed a
song to the Eminem-produced 8 Mile soundtrack.

KINGS OF NEW YORK

It was inevitable that the three breakout rappers of mid-nineties New York
would be compared to one another. Nas released the first album of the three,
but Notorious B.I.G. and Jay-Z soon followed, outselling Nas if not outshin-
ing his critical reception. In 1997, Jay-Z alluded to the competition on
“Where I’m From,” saying that locals “argue all day about who’s the best
MC: Biggie, Jay-Z, or Nas?” After Biggie’s murder that same year, the ques-
tion became which of the two survivors would claim the crown.

The story of how competition turned to beef is complicated, but worth
recounting given that beefs often go on and the flames are fanned by the fans
and the media, long after most everyone has forgotten why they began. In this
case, the origin of the beef was not with Jay-Z but with his protégé Memphis
Bleek. Bleek’s song “Memphis Bleek Is” from his debut album appeared to
mimic Nas’s “Nas Is Like.” Nas responded by including a song on Nastra-
damus with the same title as another Memphis Bleek song, “What You Think
of That?” In it, Nas takes a line that Jay-Z delivered on Bleek’s song and turns
it back on Bleek as a challenge. Nas and Memphis Bleek exchanged another
round of insults, Nas’s on “Da Bridge 2001.” This time, Nas attacked not
only Bleek but many other Roc-A-Fella artists as well.
This is where Jay-Z got involved. At the 2001 Hot 97 Summer Jam in New York, he performed a new song called “The Takeover.” It was primarily a Mobb Deep dis, with only one line about Nas. But when Nas responded with an underground song (“Stillmatic Freestyle”) attacking Jay-Z and Roc-A-Fella, Jay revised “The Takeover.” When it appeared on 2001’s *The Blueprint*, the song took direct and extended aim at Nas.

The rest of the story is familiar to most rap fans. Nas responded with “Ether,” a devastating attack that signaled a return to lyrical form by the artist and that appeared on his critically acclaimed 2001 album *Stillmatic*. Jay-Z came back with “Supa Ugly,” in which, among other things, he claims to have slept with Carmen Bryan, the mother of Nas’s daughter. Jay-Z’s own mother reportedly said that this was in poor taste, and Jay-Z actually went on Hot 97 to offer a public apology to Carmen Bryan soon after (although Bryan herself has said that Jay’s claim was true). Nonetheless, the argument about who had lyrically won the beef continued, so Hot 97 played both songs and asked fans to call in with their votes. “Ether” won over “Supa Ugly” 52 percent to 48 percent, but both artists and their followers have continued to debate the issue.

One continuing theme in the exchange between these two undeniably talented artists was a subject that is central to rap: realness or authenticity. Jay-Z broke into rap after a successful career as a drug dealer, basing most of his rhymes on a criminal career the validity of which few have questioned. Nas’s artistic strength, conversely, has often been the main point of attack by his detractors. His role in the projects was more that of observer than participant, at least in terms of heavy-duty crime and violence. Yet his lyrics paint rich pictures of street life, often using the first person to relate these tales. For listeners who understand the literary practice of writing fictional characters in the first person, Nas’s representations are unproblematic. For rap fans to whom artist and art are assumed to be one and the same, however, Nas’s first-person narrations appear to be a blatant case of fraud. Nas has never spent much time addressing this criticism, perhaps assuming that enough fans and critics understand that a defense is unnecessary. While Jay-Z has certainly fed the Nas-as-fake-gangsta flames, one suspects that Jay-Z is, in fact, one of those who understand. Strategically, he has attacked Nas on the grounds of realness when it served his purposes to do so, while at other times expressing respect for Nas’s lyrical craft.

As both artists’ places in hip hop history have become secure, the need for continued beef has diminished. In 2005, the beef was officially put to rest when Jay-Z invited Nas onstage during his *I Declare War* show; following that public reconciliation, Jay-Z used his new position as president of Def Jam Records to sign Nas to a four-album deal. Nas describes the latest turn in his relationship with Jigga as yet another way to break new ground: “How many people get over war? Any time you can squash a beef and move on, you lead by example” (Barrow 83).
LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Nas has been consistent in demonstrating a gift for rhyme and rhythm, for complex but accessible song construction. When fans of the genre insist that rap lyrics are simply poetry performed to a beat, they are referring to the kinds of literary techniques (metaphor, alliteration, rhyme, allusion) that appear throughout Nas's work.

Rap is an intensely intertextual and self-referential form. In other words, rappers often refer to other rappers, to other rap songs, and to the history of hip hop in their lyrics. Partly, this probably grows out of the competitive elements of the discourse. When a writer is trying to launch or respond to an attack, it makes sense to refer to things that have been previously said about him or her, to reference an opponent, even to compare the present battle to others that have come before. At the same time, it makes sense that rap is intertextual because literary genres generally are intertextual. Contemporary novelists regularly reference biblical stories, Shakespearean plots and characters, mythological figures, popular songs, and so on. Poets make nods, often indirectly, to one another’s work or take a line from one poem and build an entirely new piece around it. As a literary genre, then, it would be odd for rap lyrics not to use this strategy.

Nas most regularly borrows text for new songs from his own work. He often returns to his professional beginnings in these references. As we have seen, this tradition began with his first full album, which starts out by playing part of his “Live at the Barbeque” verse. “The Message,” the first song on *It Was Written*, follows this pattern by featuring lines from *Illmatic*, its immediate predecessor (the song’s title also references the classic single “The Message,” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five). The references to the artist’s moment of professional origin, in particular, continue to pop up throughout Nas’s career. Some examples: the phrase “street’s disciple,” the first two words from Nas’s “Live at the Barbeque” verse, appears in *Illmatic*’s “It Ain’t Hard to Tell,” and then, a decade later, becomes the title of his 2004 double album. Similarly, *Street’s Disciple*’s “Thief’s Theme” takes its name from a phrase on *Illmatic*’s “The World Is Yours.” “The World Is Yours,” in turn, becomes a line on both *It Was Written*’s “If I Ruled the World” and *Stillmatic*’s “Got Ur Self a Gun.”

References to movie characters, musicians, and local New York celebrities abound in Nas’s lyrics as well. *Illmatic*’s “Memory Lane” mentions Lorenzo “Fat Cat” Nichols and Ken “Supreme” McGriff, two of the major crime figures in Queens when Nas was growing up. Pappy Mason, who brought down an era of Queens drug business by murdering a New York City police officer, appears in “The World Is Yours” from the same album. One can’t be sure whether it was a romanticization of these local figures that led to Nas’s affection for mob movies like *Scarface* and *Casino*, and to his adoption of the nickname Nas Escobar (after Nicaraguan drug lord Pablo Escobar),
or whether the larger-than-life cinematic portrayals of the mob world made local criminals seem more glamorous than they actually were. Either way, references to both fictional and real-life gangsters are ubiquitous in his work. Nas also draws on novelistic influences: “Black Girl Lost,” from It Was Written, takes its title from a book by early seventies pulp writer Donald Goines, a popular source of references for so-called gangsta rappers in particular.

A particularly curious recurring reference in Nas’s lyrics is to Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the peaceful resistance to British colonial rule in India. Sometimes the allusion is to the movie rather than the historical figure, as when Nas describes “watching Gandhi ’til I’m charged” on “The World Is Yours.” On God’s Son, he returns to the revolutionary pacifist twice. In “Book of Rhymes,” Nas quotes one of his own unfinished verses: “Gandhi was a fool, Nigger, fight to the death”; he then casts doubt on his commitment to this statement by dismissing the rhyme as “weak” (see sidebar: book of rhymes). On “Revolutionary Warfare,” he is more reflective: “I’m thinking Gandhi was a fool, but chronic’s a fool.” He follows this by saying that he’s

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**Book of Rhymes**

_Mickey Hess_

The book of rhymes, rhyme book, or pad and pen has itself become a hip hop icon, making appearances in the lyrics of songs from Nas, A Tribe Called Quest, the Beastie Boys, and many other artists. Nas’s “Book of Rhymes” takes the listener through a series of unused rhymes, scraps from Nas’s journal that have not been used in his lyrics. The book of rhymes appears in hip hop music videos, films, and album covers as a visual representation of an MC’s dedication to writing rhymes. The cover art for Masta Ace’s _A Long Hot Summer_ depicts Ace sitting on his front stoop, notebook and pen in hand. In _8 Mile_, Eminem pens his battle rhymes on a city bus. In the music video for “I Try,” bullies steal a book of rhymes from a young Talib Kweli, and later return the book because they are so impressed with the writing. The rhyme book also appeared on the MTV series Made, in which high school students write in to ask the network to help them fulfill their dreams of being athletes, musicians, or socialites. In one episode, a Minneapolis teen, The Blizzard, is sent to New York to meet Ghostface Killah, who shows him a stack of composition notebooks and tells him to “write every day.”

The RZA’s _Wu-Tang Manual_ features a page copied from one of Ghostface’s rhyme books. The handwriting conveys a sense of urgency and at the same time recalls the graffiti writing that preceded MCing in hip hop’s formative years. Similarly, in the video for Del the Funky Homosapien’s “Catch a Bad One,” viewers can see pages from Del’s rhyme book. The primacy of paper and pen among MCs reminds fans that hip hop is a writing culture, very much
just “thinking out loud,” suggesting that he’s not yet quite ready to trade his beloved marijuana for civil disobedience. The fact that he introduces such an uncharacteristic symbol in his lyrics and continues to muse on it over time in the presence of his audience suggests an intellectual openness and engagement that Nas is inviting his listeners to share.

One of the most common literary techniques in rap is the metaphor (simile is included under this category). It’s difficult to find songs in the genre that don’t incorporate metaphor, even if they are often somewhat obvious or clumsy. Nas doesn’t overload his songs with this technique, but when he does use metaphor, it is often particularly original or clever: “like Malcolm X catching the jungle fever” (“Halftime”), “Made me richer than a slipper made Cinderella” (“One Time 4 Your Mind”).

The literary technique Nas most strongly excels in is the one that would seem to be most pedestrian: rhyme. However, while many rappers struggle to come up with one good rhyme for each bar, Nas regularly tosses off a series of them within a single line. Along with his confident delivery, it is this skill that stands out on his earliest recordings. The first lines in the first song on his first album threaten to overwhelm the listener with the sheer quantity and quality of rhyme and near-rhyme. This kind of virtuoso performance reveals an artist reveling in his talent, while simultaneously putting listeners on notice that they are in for something new and exciting.

Nas’s formal inventiveness, which would reemerge throughout his career, is first on display in Illmatic’s “One Love,” a song composed solely of letters written to a friend in jail. Several years later, Eminem would employ a similarly striking use of the epistolary form in “Stan.” Nas explains that the title of the song came from Bob Marley’s famous song of the same name, which in turn echoed the ubiquitous street salutation “one” (similar to “peace”) used around Nas’s neighborhood. He had a number of friends in jail at the time and was receiving letters from them detailing their experiences there. Another unique lyrical form appears in God’s Son’s “Book of Rhymes,” in which we hear the rapper standing in the studio, flipping through the pages of one of his old notebooks (we even hear the shuffle of the paper as the pages turn), performing snatches of half-finished lyrics and then commenting on them to himself and his producer (well-known hip hop producer the Alchemist). It Was Written’s “I Gave You Power” plays with point of view, offering the first-person narrative of a gun. Young Noble, a close friend of Tupac Shakur’s, claims that this song was the inspiration for Tupac’s “Me and My Girlfriend,” which uses a similar conceit. “Rewind,” from Illmatic, is a revenge narrative

based on the power of the written word. Eschewing computers and word processing software, MCs carry notebooks in which they can jot their rhymes on city buses and in the streets. Seeing handwritten pages from these rhyme books personalizes the writing even further.
told in reverse, including backward dialogue and actions (e.g. “I vomited vodka back in my glass with juice and ice”).

NAS’S IMPACT AND LEGACY

One of the debates critics and fans alike indulge in when it comes to Nas is whether any of his subsequent albums achieved the seamless artistry of *Illmatic*. Ironically, every album after *Illmatic* surpassed it in terms of sales, but none received the kind of unanimous admiration of that first release. What it does to someone to know that he may have achieved his artistic peak with his first work is something only such an artist can know. In Nas’s case, it seems to have led to frustration and freedom in more or less equal measures. As he matures, the freedom appears to be winning out, particularly now that his beef with Jay-Z is behind him. There will always be rappers trying to start beef with Nas because of the attention it brings them, but Nas’s attitude seems to be that between the evidence of his own body of work and his success against an artist of Jay-Z’s caliber, he doesn’t need to prove himself by rising to every verbal assault aimed his way. In addition, time has served to lessen expectations that Nas will someday make another *Illmatic* and has simultaneously seen critics and fans reconsidering the merits of his other albums.

Nas is a hip hop icon both in spite of and because of his ups and downs. He matters because his songs ooze hip hop in subject, attitude, style, and skill. One is tempted to see Nas as a lived, if compressed, version of rapper Common’s classic hip hop allegory, “I Used to Love H.E.R.” Like the female stand-in for hip hop in that song, Nas started in the streets, rapping out of “a love for the thing” (to quote Mos Def, another accomplished rap lyricist); his lyrics move from gritty narratives to Afrocentricity and conscious themes to God, bitches, and bling, sometimes within one song, with marijuana winding a pungent trail in and around it all. At the end of “I Used to Love H.E.R.,” Common pledges to take his world-weary love back to her roots. Nas has never needed a musical savior, though; part of the fascination of his career is that he has the depth of talent to return to top form even after several artistically uneven releases. This means that until he hangs up his mic for good, no one who knows their hip hop history will ever count Nas out.

Nas is also a part of the small group of rappers on whom academia has turned an approving gaze. Since his artistic emergence, Nas has been something of a scholar’s darling, referenced regularly in books and articles exploring the ideological and artistic implications of black youth culture. Given Nas’s attention to African history, the term *griot* is particularly apt. Griots are nomadic West African poets and storytellers, oral historians who were traditionally attached to a particular royal family. They go from town to town recounting their patrons’ histories and exploits, and are thus the appointed keepers and disseminators of cultural knowledge. Applying the
term to a rapper like Nas may be partly inadvertently ironic, since he recounts the stories not of the high and mighty but of the dispossessed.

In an era in which rapper has become almost synonymous with entrepreneur, Nas stands out as an artist who is first and foremost committed to his craft. He has been criticized for not capitalizing on his reputation by branching out into other businesses, like so many of his peers. On Illmatic’s “The Genesis,” Nas says to his friends, “When it’s real, you’re doing this with or without a record contract.” That love of music and lyrics remains at the core of Nas’s work, and it is what makes him a hip hop icon.

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Remixes, Compilations, and Side Projects

Wu-Tang Clan is a group of nine MCs that formed in Staten Island in the early 1990s. The structure of the group was unprecedented. RZA’s goal was to build a team of nine generals, a group of nine artists who stood on equal footing and who could each succeed at solo careers, but who were bound together by loyalty to the Clan. The RZA, the GZA, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Inspectah Deck, Raekwon the Chef, Ghostface Killah, Method Man, Masta Killa, and U-God burst onto the hip hop scene with a raw new sound that redefined New York hip hop and reaffirmed New York City as the center of the hip hop universe. In the early 1990s, West Coast producer Dr. Dre had created a new sound that he called G-funk in tribute to George Clinton’s group Parliament Funkadelic (P-Funk), but with a distinct gangsta attitude. Dr. Dre’s work on N.W.A.’s Efil4zaggin (1991) and his own album The Chronic (1993) had shifted attention to the West Coast’s new, laid-back style of hip hop.

In 1993, a new label, Loud Records, released twelve-inch singles from Wu-Tang Clan and Mobb Deep, two groups that along with Nas and
Notorious B.I.G. would reestablish New York City as the center of hip hop. Loud’s first seven releases included four singles from Wu-Tang and one solo twelve-inch, “Heaven & Hell,” from Raekwon. Wu-Tang’s new, sparse, sound would help reaffirm that New Yorkers not only invented hip hop music but remained innovators as well. With gritty beats and versatile rhyme styles from nine different MCs, Wu-Tang changed hip hop music, hip hop style, and hip hop business. Wu-Tang Clan is significant in that the group was able to ink an unprecedented contract that allowed each of them free reign to record as solo artists with any label of their choosing. It was by diversifying and expanding that the Wu would take over the record industry. Yet no matter how successful these solo careers have been, the nine members have remained true to Wu-Tang Clan for life and have rejoined forces to release four full-length Wu-Tang Clan albums: *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (1993), *Wu-Tang Forever* (1997), *The W* (2000), and *Iron Flag* (2001). Since the death of Ol’ Dirty Bastard, who suffered a cocaine-related heart attack in a New York City recording studio in 2005, Wu-Tang Clan has yet to release a new album. As solo artists, however, Wu-Tang members continue to be productive and innovative.

Wu-Tang Clan’s financial savvy has become so legendary in the world of hip hop that Dave Chapelle, on Comedy Central’s *Chapelle’s Show*, invited RZA and GZA to guest star in a sketch called “Wu-Tang Financial.” The sketch parodies television commercials for financial planners, and features RZA and GZA sitting in a corporate boardroom, giving accounting advice to well-dressed white businesspeople: “You gotta diversify your bonds, nigga.” RZA and GZA learned the secrets of the music business the hard way. The Wu-Tang saga began when hip hop artists and cousins the Genius (now GZA) and Prince Rakeem (now RZA) found themselves signed to unsatisfactory record contracts. Rakeem changed his name to RZA and began working on a new crew of MCs that would bring a new style to hip hop. Wu-Tang Clan would make him famous for his signature sound: His use of organs, violins, and operatic singing, along with samples of kung fu, blaxploitation, and gangster films, made him unique among producers. The name Wu-Tang Clan is borrowed from a kung fu film about a group of martial arts students who rebel against their teachers, and was transformed by the group into an acronym for Witty Unpredictable Talent and Natural Game. The name is a significant comment on Wu-Tang’s approach to making music. Like the young martial artists in the film from which they took their name, Wu-Tang Clan broke with tradition to create a new style all their own.

Naming is very important to the mythology Wu-Tang Clan has built around itself. Wu-Tang lyrics draw from martial arts films, comic books, and gangster movies. Members of the group take on multiple names that often reference these influences. RZA, for instance, also goes by Bobby Steels (combining the name of Black Panther revolutionary Bobby Seale with the wheels of steel, a slang term for turntables), the Abbot, and Bobby Digital.
Method Man calls himself Johnny Blaze, Ticallion Stallion, Hot Nikkels, the MZA, and John-John McLane (a name he borrows from Bruce Willis’s character in the *Die Hard* films). Other Wu names include Ironman, Lucky Hands, Golden Arms, Lex Diamond, and Noodles. While recording their second album, *Wu-Tang Forever*, group members took on Italian Mafia names and called themselves collectively the Wu-Gambinos.

*Wu-Tang*’s debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, contained samples of radio interviews the group had done. Raekwon and Method Man took turns introducing the group members: first, the RZA, the head of the organization. RZA’s production combined gritty SP-1200 beats with ethereal violins, piano, and singing, lending a new operatic sound to music he had made on a classic machine. The GZA, the genius. His lyrical wordplay and complicated rhythms would influence Method Man and Inspectah Deck, MCs whose internal rhymes (like Deck’s “Socrates’ philosophies and hypotheses”) and extended metaphors (like Method Man’s “bust shots at Big Ben like we got time to kill”) would raise the art of rhyming to a new level. Ghostface Killah added high-pitched, urgently delivered vocals. Ol’ Dirty Bastard added a gruff, barked delivery and a level of unpredictability to their songs and performances but would shift into soulful wails within these same verses. Method Man also had several unique and distinctive rhyming methods. The singing styles that ODB and Method Man brought to their vocals influenced later artists such as Nelly and Cee-Lo. U-God’s deep voice and Masta Killa’s laid-back delivery rounded out the group.

Wu-Tang built choruses around call-and-response chants that sounded almost military (“Clan in da Front” in particular) and were often developed from the question-and-answer format of the Five Percenters’ Infinity Lessons. Much of Wu-Tang’s slang derives from the Five Percenters as well. They often refer to each other as “God,” to their mothers as “Old Earth,” and to the “mathematics” and “knowledge” they seek to achieve and to convey to their listeners. RZA’s involvement with the Five Percenters during his childhood led him to his wider interests in religion, numerology, and strategy, which form the backbone of the Wu-Tang philosophy. Outside RZA’s studies in religions ranging from the Nation of Islam to Buddhism to Christianity, his other influences range from martial arts to Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* to the game of chess.

Although most of the members of Wu-Tang Clan have become successful artists in their own right, each solo album includes at least one track that features other members of the clan, as well as close affiliates Capadonna, Tru Masta, Sunz of Man, Popa Wu, and Killah Priest (now calling himself Priesthood), many of whom have released their own solo albums as well. After the success of solo albums from Method Man, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, GZA, Raekwon, and Ghostface Killah, *Wu-Tang Clan* reunited to record *Wu-Tang Forever*, a double album that showcased the group’s excess as much as its loyalty. RZA’s production added a new level of theatrics to what had originated as a
stripped-down sound. Wu-Tang released an epic, six-minute music video for “Triumph,” directed by Brett Ratner, who directed *X-Men: Standoff* and the *Rush Hour* trilogy. Ratner brought his special effects expertise to the project; the video opens with Ol’ Dirty Bastard leaping from a skyscraper, and Inspectah Deck rhyming while clinging to the side of the same building. Such excess was justified; *Wu-Tang Forever* was highly anticipated by fans, and debuted at number one on the *Billboard* albums chart.

Even after the death of founding member Ol’ Dirty Bastard in 2004, Wu-Tang Clan continues to build a hip hop dynasty through new solo albums, film scores, movie roles, book deals, and collaborations with new artists outside the clan. In a radio interview included on *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, a reporter asks a young Raekwon and Method Man what their ultimate goal is for the group. Raekwon lists bringing a new sound to hip hop through styles that people have never before heard. Method Man, who also describes how he wants to build a sustainable career and give his children the things he couldn’t afford growing up, best sums up his goals in one word: domination. With a career spanning over twelve years at the top of the hip hop game, Wu-Tang Clan has made that happen.

**RZA**

RZA (pronounced “rizza”) is short for razor, and refers to the sharpness of RZA’s rhymes, beats, and business savvy. The name also mimics the sound of turntable scratching to stutter a vocal track (“rizza rizza Rakeem”). In 1991, before the official formation of the Wu-Tang Clan, RZA (Robert Diggs), recording as Prince Rakeem, released two singles through Tommy Boy Records: “Ooh, I Love You Rakeem,” and “My Deadly Venom.” He’d produced these two songs on the advice of his label, but neither song fared well in the industry. So, when RZA, GZA, and Ol’ Dirty Bastard formed Wu-Tang Clan, RZA wanted to have control of the group’s production decisions. This amount of control was unconventional in the music industry, so RZA declined offers from several different labels before finally signing a contract with Loud Records in 1993. In his book, *The Wu-Tang Manual*, he claims that their deal “changed the way hip-hop artists negotiate, the way deals are structured; it changed the whole rap game” (76).

His plan was to negotiate not only for the present, but also for the future, attributing this strategy to his love of chess. He promised the group that, if they would give him five years, he would ensure their success not only as a group but as solo artists. During that time, he produced Wu-Tang’s first group album and all of the group members’ solo albums. The release of the group’s second album, *Wu-Tang Forever*, marked the end of his five-year plan. He’d provided the success he’d promised and afterward wasn’t as fully involved in each member’s individual projects.
During these fateful five years, the RZA became one of the hardest working producers in the music industry. After *Enter the Wu-Tang* was released, RZA recorded with a second group, Gravediggaz, a horror-theme hip hop group consisting of RZA, Prince Paul, Frukwan, and Too Poetic. The Gravediggaz released three albums, though RZA stopped working with the group after their sophomore album, 1997's *The Pick, the Sickle, and the Shovel*. The group is notable because their debut album, 1994’s *Six Feet Deep*, was a collaboration between RZA and Prince Paul, two of hip hop’s most revered producers. At the time of the album’s recording, Prince Paul was known for the unique sound he had created on albums such as De La Soul’s *3 Feet High and Rising*, and RZA, until then a relatively unknown artist, was beginning to get attention for the new sound he brought to the Wu-Tang’s debut album. Gravediggaz were also pioneers of a hip hop subgenre, horrorcore (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Horror).

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**Hip Hop and Horror**

*Danielle Hess*

Horror in hip hop traces its roots back to the Geto Boys’ *We Can’t Be Stopped* (1991), the cover of which features a graphic photograph of Bushwick Bill on a hospital gurney, surrounded by fellow Geto Boys members Willie D and Scarface. Bushwick was hospitalized after forcing his girlfriend to assist in his suicide attempt. In the photograph, Bushwick’s eye is swollen and bleeding from a bullet wound. *We Can’t Be Stopped* also featured the song “Chuckie,” named after a character from the horror film series *Child’s Play*.

“Chuckie” was written by horrorcore pioneer Ganxsta Nip, whose debut CD *South Park Psycho* (1992) was shrouded in controversy when it was found in the tape deck of a teenager who killed a police officer. The first song on the album was “Horror Movie Rap,” which sampled the *Halloween* soundtrack. Other pioneers include Insane Poetry, unique for combining images of horror with reality to create a socially conscious rap that often outlines the struggles of black America, and Esham, whose album *KKKill the Fetus* (1993) encourages drug-addicted pregnant women to abort their fetuses.

While there is much debate over who coined the term *horrorcore*, it was not until the 1994 release of the Flatlinerz’ *USA (Under Satan’s Authority)* and Gravediggaz’ *Six Feet Deep* that the term hit the mainstream. While most horrorcore album sales are lackluster, groups like Insane Clown Posse, Twizted, and Necro have achieved substantial sales.

In production, the theme music from horror films can provide a dramatic backdrop for MC vocals. The Beastie Boys and Busta Rhymes both have used the score from the classic horror flick *Psycho*. The *Halloween* theme song has been sampled by Dr. Dre, the No Limit Records group Tru, and Project Pat, along with Ganxsta Nip. Other hip hop artists feature horror movies prominently in their music. Metabolics and Mr. Dead use samples from old horror movies to add to themes of Armageddon and death.
Aside from his production work with Wu-Tang, the Wu solo albums, and Gravediggaz, RZA recorded his own solo album, 1998’s *RZA as Bobby Digital in Stereo*. Bobby Digital was one of RZA’s pseudonyms, and, in the album, he raps as the personality this pseudonym portrays, a futuristic MC from outer space. This is a technique RZA adapted from Kool Keith, who, after his group Ultramagnetic MCs broke up, recorded a solo album under the name Dr. Octagon, a gynecologist from Jupiter. RZA’s Bobby Digital persona utilized this same outer space theme, one that would also be used for Deltron 3030, a collaboration between Del the Funky Homosapien and Dr. Octagon producer Dan the Automator, who would later work with Prince Paul in the group Handsome Boy Modeling School. Kool Keith, known to be unpredictable, lampooned RZA’s Bobby Digital persona by releasing an album as Robbie Analog. In 2001, RZA released his second album, *Digital Bullet*, a follow-up Bobby Digital album.

In 1999, RZA started composing movie soundtracks. His first soundtrack was for Jim Jarmusch’s *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, a film that featured a chess-playing martial artist in New York City. It was right up RZA’s alley, and, in addition to the soundtrack, he had a small role in the film. From there, he composed the soundtracks for *Kill Bill*, *Blade: Trinity*, and *Soul Plane*. He and GZA played themselves in a skit in Jarmusch’s *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2004), and RZA and several other Wu members played themselves in the 2003 movie, *Scary Movie 3*.

RZA’s first solo album as RZA, *Birth of a Prince*, was released in 2003, and featured longtime Wu affiliate True Master. That same year, RZA produced *The World According to RZA*, an album for which he recruited MCs from several European countries. Many of the vocals are not in English, and RZA’s production showcases the vocal talents of European hip hop artists. The album was followed up with the 2004 DVD of the same title, which consists of documentary footage of RZA’s travels, as well as a live concert in Germany with Euro rap stars Xavier Naidoo, Curse, Afrob and Seko.

In 2005, the RZA published *The Wu-Tang Manual*, his guide to everything important about the group. This book was unprecedented; no other hip hop
artist before him had published such a detailed guide to a group and its music. In the book, RZA gives a short overview of each member in the group, but overall it revolves around his personal beliefs and experiences as a member of the Wu-Tang Clan. RZA speaks about the things that influenced both the group- and business-oriented mentality that ultimately led to the group’s success. Some of these influences were spiritualism, martial arts, comics, chess, the Mafia, movies, and capitalism. He dedicated a chapter to explaining each element and how it led to Wu-Tang’s ideals.

RZA explains the many influences that were important to the formation of the Wu-Tang Clan as well as to himself as an artist. RZA discusses his spiritual influences from the Five Percenters and the Nation of Islam (see sidebar: Islam and Hip Hop under Eric B. & Rakim) to Buddhism and other East Asian religions. While it was ultimately his spirituality that led to his dedication to his group members, RZA cites chess as what made him excel in his five-year plan. He explains that he used to play chess with the old men on Wall Street, and that chess taught him to think ahead and to strategize, leading him to develop and negotiate Wu-Tang’s legendary contract with Loud Records.

The first half of the book is dedicated to explaining these group influences while the second half focuses primarily on their music. In “Book Three,” RZA prints lyrics from nine different Wu-Tang songs and, in sidebars, explains exactly what those lyrics refer to. The fourth book focuses on producing, sampling, MCing, and performing live.

Other elements of The Wu-Tang Manual include six pages of slang term definitions, the histories of several comic books, Mafia films, and kung fu movies, and a thorough explanation of Supreme Mathematics. When RZA introduces an element that he cites as a group influence, he gives the information necessary for his readers to put that influence into context. He annotates the lyrics to several Wu-Tang songs, offering explanations of phrases used by his band mates and commenting on their unique rhyme styles.

**GZA**

GZA (Gary Grice) is the oldest of the three cousins (RZA, GZA, and Ol’ Dirty Bastard) who formed Wu-Tang Clan. Before Wu-Tang formed, GZA was the first of its future members to release a solo album, *Words from the Genius* (1991), which featured the minor pop-rap hit “Come Do Me.” The album had disappointing sales, and many of the decisions about it were made by his label, Cold Chillin’. GZA’s displeasure with his label eventually led to the formation of the Wu-Tang Clan and the contract that gave the nine members more control over their music. On his song “Labels,” GZA calls out specific hip hop record labels for misleading and mistreating hip hop artists. RZA opens the track with spoken dialogue, urging young rappers to “read the labels” or else be poisoned.
GZA was born and raised in New York City. When rap music was still in its infancy, GZA was traveling around New York, performing in rap battles. He took his two younger cousins with him to these battles and encouraged their interests in rap music. In *The Wu-Tang Manual*, RZA explains that GZA was the one who taught him about two things: MCing and Supreme Mathematics. RZA studied under GZA and later taught Ol’ Dirty Bastard what he had learned. This spiritual aspect became a large part of what the Wu-Tang Clan would stand for.

In 1994, GZA recorded “I Gotcha Back,” a single from the movie soundtrack *Fresh*. In 1995, he released his first solo album since the formation of the Wu-Tang Clan. GZA’s solo album, *Liquid Swords*, extends Wu-Tang’s metaphor of the tongue as a sword. The album cover depicts GZA cutting the head off an opponent over a chessboard. The back cover of *Liquid Swords* listed the songs out of order, their titles worked into a paragraph-length story. This technique, along with the carefully placed samples from martial arts movies, may indicate that GZA intends the album to tell a consistent story and that he is complicating any attempts to skip from track to track with no regard for narrative consistency. Ghostface would later list his songs out of order on the back cover of *Bulletproof Wallets*.

*Liquid Swords* opens with a lengthy sample from the film *Shogun Assassin*. The same movie dialogue would later be heard in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* 2, as Beatrice Kiddo watches *Shogun Assassin* with her daughter. After the initial sample of dialogue from *Shogun Assassin*, GZA’s *Liquid Swords* shifts into the title track’s organ sample and its chorus, which GZA chants along with RZA: “When the MCs came, to live out their name . . . ” *Liquid Swords* is GZA’s solo classic, yet it showcases RZA on the title track, Method Man on the steady-paced “Shadow Boxin’,” and RZA, Killah Priest, and Ghostface Killah on “4th Chamber,” which samples one of Prince’s guitar riffs. Wu-Tang solo albums tend to include guest appearances from other members of the group, both to show solidarity and to enhance the quality of the music.

Since *Liquid Swords*, GZA has continued to be active in recording. In 1999, he released his third solo album, *Beneath the Surface*. His fourth solo album, *Legend of the Liquid Sword*, was released in 2002. *Legend of the Liquid Sword* contained a track titled “Uncut Material” that was the first Wu-Tang song that was produced exclusively by GZA. Both albums sold well and were well received by his fans and critics. In 2004, GZA released a greatest hits album, *Collection of Classics*. The same year he announced that his son, Young Justice, was preparing to release his debut solo album. Young Justice had been featured on the intro to *Legend of the Liquid Sword* and had later released a cover of GZA’s “Killa Hills 10304.” The second generation of Wu-Tang appears to be on the horizon: Ghostface Killah’s son delivers a live verse on his father’s 2006 DVD, *Put It on the Line*.

In 2005, GZA released an album, *Grandmasters*, a collaboration with DJ Muggs, a producer best known for his work with Cypress Hill, House of Pain,
and Funkdoobiest, as well as his own group Soul Assassins. Muggs’s signature sound borrows the high-pitched horns and vocals first used by the Bomb Squad, who produced albums for Public Enemy and Ice Cube. Muggs’s production on Grandmasters brought this style to meet with Wu-Tang’s finest MCs. Along with GZA, Raekwon, RZA, and Masta Killa provide verses on the album. Cypress Hill’s Sen Dog joins in as well, delivering a verse in Spanish. GZA is rumored to be a large part of Raekwon the Chef’s upcoming solo album Only Built 4 Cuban Linx II. He is currently working on his sixth solo album through his new deal with Babygrande Records.

**OL’ DIRTY BASTARD**

Ol’ Dirty Bastard (Russell Jones) was so named because “there ain’t no father to his style,” Method Man explains on Enter the Wu-Tang. Dirty’s vocal style was unprecedented in hip hop, lying somewhere between Al Green’s soulful cries and Rick James’s funky wails, combined with gruff hip hop grunts and growls that were 100 percent ODB. Like Method Man, Dirty both rapped and sang his verses, alternating between the two even within one line. This technique is evident in his Wu-Tang and solo vocals, as well as in his guest appearances on Mariah Carey’s song “Fantasy” and on Pras’s “Ghetto Supastar,” which revised the Kenny Rogers–Dolly Parton duet “Islands in the Stream.” Dirty ends the song by mimicking Kenny Rogers’s wails on the original.

Ol’ Dirty was RZA’s cousin from Brooklyn, and he used to ride the train to RZA’s mother’s home in Staten Island so he could rhyme and watch kung fu movies with the rest of the crew. RZA, GZA, and Dirty formed a group called All in Together Now that would lay the foundation for the collective that would become the Wu-Tang Clan. Wu-Tang’s debut, Enter the Wu-Tang, included the second track, “Shame on a Nigga,” which introduced Ol’ Dirty Bastard to the world. His staggered rhyme style featured fragmented phrases and onomatopoeia: “You wanna get gun? Shoot. Blow!” Dirty was the second Wu-Tang member to release a solo album, and the first member to embark on a solo tour (in 1998). Although all nine Wu-Tang members have given themselves several nicknames, Ol’ Dirty’s were often the most outrageous and caught the attention of music journalists. He called himself Osirus, Dirt McGirt, Ason Unique, and Big Baby Jesus. Dirty even changed his voice from one line to the next on his debut album, Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version. On his hit single, “Shimmy Shimmy Ya,” the entire second verse was flipped backward.

With these vocal styles and his often X-rated subject material, Ol’ Dirty Bastard was the most outrageous member of the Wu-Tang Clan. The Dirty Version begins with a long spoken-word track in which Dirty complains about getting gonorrhea from a woman, then going back to the same woman
and getting burned again. After the group’s first album became a hit, he famously took MTV cameras with him as he rode in a limousine to pick up his welfare check. He would reference this lifestyle on Wu-Tang Clan’s “Dog Shit”: “Got bills but still grill that old good welfare cheese.” Dirty, like the other members of the Wu-Tang Clan, strived to get out of the poverty he’d lived in as a child. He was raised in Brooklyn on public assistance, and he fathered his first child as a teenager. In opposition to the glamorous lifestyles portrayed by Bad Boy Records artists Puff Daddy and Notorious B.I.G., who claimed to have risen from poverty to strike it rich in the music business, Dirty’s debut album cover featured a re-creation of his food stamp card.

Ultimately, it was Dirty’s mentality of keeping one foot in the ghetto that would lead to his early death. As a hip hop superstar, Dirty remained addicted to heroin and spent time in prison for weapons possession and drug offenses. In prison, his health was bad. He needed dental work, and fellow inmates jumped him and broke his leg. He missed the recording of Wu-Tang’s third group album, The W. Ol’ Dirty’s problems with substance abuse became a topic for his rhymes. He guest starred on Tha Alkaholiks’ “Hip-hop Drunkies,” and uttered lines in his own lyrics like “I get the cocaine, it cleans out my sinuses.” The antics that Dirty wrote into his lyrics were killing him in real life. The charges for which he was arrested included one in 1997 for failing to pay over a year’s worth of child support on three of his alleged thirteen children. The three children were those that he shared with his wife, Icelene. In other arrests, Dirty was charged with assault (1993), shoplifting (1998), carrying drugs (1999), and even wearing a bulletproof vest (1999). California had recently enacted a law stating that it was illegal for a convicted felon to wear a bulletproof vest. Dirty was one of the first arrested under this law.

Ol’ Dirty’s arrests and antics only added to his legend. In October 2000, he escaped while being transported from a drug treatment center to the Los Angeles Criminal Courthouse. He remained a fugitive for nearly a month before he made a surprise appearance onstage with Wu-Tang Clan at New York’s Hammerstein Ballroom. The concert was the release show for Wu-Tang’s new album The W. RZA announced Ol’ Dirty as a special guest, and he joined the Wu-Tang Clan to perform “Shame on a Nigga” before fleeing the venue. He was arrested five days later signing autographs for fans outside a McDonald’s in south Philadelphia.

In February 1998, during one of the most memorable weeks of his career, ODB interrupted country singer Shawn Colvin’s acceptance speech at the Grammy Awards ceremony. Climbing, uninvited, onto the stage, Dirty complained about losing to Puff Daddy in the category of Best Rap Album. Earlier that week he had announced that he was launching a clothing line, My Dirty Wear, and he had pulled a four-year-old girl from a burning car. Although he left the scene before police arrived, Dirty seemed to offer a veiled reference to his act of heroism in his impromptu speech, uttering the mysterious line, “Wu-Tang is for the children.” His heroism was unfortunately overshadowed
by his performance at the Grammys, which added to his image as an unpredictable, unstable rap artist.

Ol’ Dirty started a trend of rappers acting out at awards shows. He connects with a similar feat pulled by MCA of the Beastie Boys at the MTV Music Awards, and preceded the infamous brawl at the 2000 Source Awards, in which Bone Thugs-N-Harmony rapper Krayzie Bone was injured, and the 2004 Vibe Awards, during which G-Unit’s Young Buck stabbed a man in defense of Dr. Dre. These antics are parodied in Aaron McGruder’s comic and television show The Boondocks, in which rappers often throw chairs at each other, and the character Eat Dirt is a caricature of Ol’ Dirty Bastard.

After his release from prison in 2003, Dirty capitalized on becoming a caricature of himself. He played himself in skits on America’s Next Top Model and MTV’s Video Music Awards. Before his death, the men’s network Spike TV filmed the first season of an Ol’ Dirty Bastard reality show called Stuck on Dirty, in which a contestant was required to remain within ten feet of the rapper as he went through his daily life. The series has never aired, although Spike, with the blessing of Ol’ Dirty’s mother and his manager, has announced plans to run it in the future.

Though he is most known for Return to the 36 Chambers, Dirty’s second solo album, Nigga Please, was much anticipated, and was his hip hop tribute to funk and soul. The cover art features Ol’ Dirty wearing a 1970s-style track suit and sporting a long, curly wig. The sound is very different from the raw, gruff vocals of his debut album. The RZA produced only two tracks, and Wu-Tang affiliates True Master and Buddah Monk contributed mixing and production to three more, but the bulk of the album’s production was done by the Neptunes: Chad Hugo and Pharrell Williams. The Neptunes’ production made Dirty’s sound more club friendly. He covered a Rick James song, “Cold Blooded,” adding his own vocal flair over interpolations from James’s original and new beats produced by the Neptunes. The hit single “Got Your Money” featured hip hop singer Kelis, who later married Nas and scored hits of her own with “Milkshake” and “Bossy.” Even over the cleaner production style of the Neptunes, Dirty’s lyrics remained gritty and included references to tossed salads (prison slang for analingus) and cocaine.

Dirty’s third solo album, The Trials and Tribulations of Russell Jones, was released in 2002 while he was locked up in the Clinton Correctional Facility doing prison time and undergoing drug rehabilitation. The album was pieced together from scraps of material Dirty had recorded in the studio. In a prison interview with William Shaw, Dirty made clear that he had no part in making the album, and had not even seen the track listing or cover art.

Ol’ Dirty Bastard signed to Roc-A-Fella records in 2003. On November 13, 2004, he collapsed and died in a New York City recording studio, two days before his thirty-sixth birthday, of a cocaine overdose. His death came just as two other Wu-Tang members, Ghostface Killah and Raekwon the Chef, were returning to the drug stories they had told in their earlier albums.
Even with his drug problems, Dirty was hard at work in the studio in the months preceding his death. While an official Roc-A-Fella album has yet to surface, some of his final recordings have been released by other labels, on the compilation CDs Osirus: The Official Mixtape and Rest in Peace, Dirt McGirt.

RAEKWON THE CHEF

Raekwon the Chef (Corey Woods) was given his nickname for three reasons. First, he liked to cook, and he often cooked for the other members of the Wu-Tang Clan. Second, in the Wu-Tang martial arts movies upon which the group based much of their ideology, one of the best fighters was a pudgy figure named the Chef. The final reason Raekwon was called the chef, according to RZA, was because of his flavor or style. Early on, he was the most fashion-conscious member of the group, although soon other Wu-Tang Clan members worked with him to found Wu-Wear, a new clothing line. Raekwon was also the most fluent and creative member in slang. In The Wu-Tang Manual, RZA asserts that Raekwon’s first solo album, Only Built 4 Cuban Linx, “has the most slang ever in hip-hop” (21). The album title itself means “made for those in the know.” RZA’s book features a six-page glossary of Wu-Tang slang, much of it invented by Raekwon.

Raekwon has the honor of being the first MC heard on Wu-Tang’s breakout single “C.R.E.A.M.,” which brought them to MTV airplay. The track opens with spoken dialogue between Raekwon and Method Man, then launches into Raekwon’s verse: “I grew up on the crime side, the New York Times side.” After recording Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers), Raekwon stayed with Loud rather than seeking another label to release his debut single, “Heaven and Hell” in 1994. His first solo album, Only Built 4 Cuban Linx, was released in 1995, and it went gold within three days. The album plays like a movie from beginning to end, each track seeming to follow the previous one seamlessly, the songs woven together by samples from Italian Mafia films. Only Built 4 Cuban Linx is Raekwon’s album, but the album cover states “guest starring Tony Starks (Ghost Face Killer).” The cover of this album was the first time that Ghostface had shown his face to the world, having previously worn a mask in all of the group’s appearances. Ghostface appears on the album almost as much as Raekwon, rhyming on twelve of the eighteen tracks, and in most songs they trade verses. In the album, the two MCs take on many alter egos and comic book personas, including Raekwon’s Lex Diamond. The single “Verbal Intercourse” also features Nas Escobar, an alternative persona of Nas.

Only Built 4 Cuban Linx was one of the first hip hop albums to use Mafia themes (see sidebar: Hip Hop and the Mafia). In The Wu-Tang Manual, RZA calls Raekwon a “master criminologist” (21). In “Incarcerated Scarfaces,” Raekwon expresses respect for the Mafia. He scorns black people who get
money and forget where they came from, stating, “Guess who’s the black Trump?” This is a reflection on his success as an artist who earned his money by staying connected to his time growing up in the projects. The song references the film *Scarface*, in which Tony Montana (played by Al Pacino) rises from low status as a Cuban immigrant to Mafia don. The video, shot in black and white, mimicked the style of classic Mafia films. The N.W.A. members dressed in suits, rather than the black baseball caps, sagging jeans, and plaid jackets they had sported in other videos to assert their association with LA gang culture. They shot tommy guns instead of the AK-47s and nine millimeters they so often brandished in their videos, press photos, and album covers. This mafia imagery was also adopted by Kool G Rap, Notorious B.I.G, Ill Bill, Scarface, and several other artists. While street gang imagery remains prevalent in gangsta rap today, with Snoop Dogg often throwing gang signs in his videos, N.W.A.’s video set the stage for a new wave of criminal imagery tied less to street gangs than to the organized crime of the Mafia. Even as he maintains his gang allegiance in videos, Snoop has embraced Mafia imagery as well; his album *The Dogfather* played on Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* films.

Wu-Tang Clan is another group that adopted new Mafioso personas as the Wu-Gambinos for their second album *Wu-Tang Forever*. This album picked up on the Mafia imagery that featured prominently in Raekwon the Chef’s solo album, *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*. On that album, Wu-Tang members Raekwon and Ghostface Killah referenced Mafia figures in their lyrics and samples, presenting the gangster as a ruthless but glamorous underdog figure who got rich through crime. In the song “Incarcerated Scarfaces” from his album *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*, Raekwon the Chef expresses his respect for Mafia members with the line, “Word up, peace, incarcerated Scarfaces.” The film *Scarface*, which tells the story of fictional Cuban-born mafioso Tony Montana, is a favorite of Ghostface Killah and Raekwon. The film is also widely sampled by artists like Ill Bill. The figure of the Mafia don carries more wealth than the figure of the street thug, and as hip hop became big business, several artists started to promote themselves as dons who enjoyed the spoils of crime while removed from the streets.
Wu-Tang Forever. When it came to recording Immobilarity, though, Raekwon became impatient with RZA’s busy schedule and his own place in line among the other members of the clan. So instead of waiting for RZA’s production and signature sound, Raekwon chose to use other producers, many of whom had just gotten into the field but hadn’t yet made names for themselves. Several tracks were produced by Triflyn, a member of American Cream Team, a new group assembled by Raekwon. Further asserting his independence, Raekwon avoided Ghostface’s guest star role on Immobilarity. Ghostface wasn’t featured on a single track, but Method Man and Masta Killa did make one appearance each. Immobilarity is almost exclusively MCed by Raekwon, with the exception of the two verses by Method Man and Masta Killa, and cameos by American Cream Team and Big Bub.

Raekwon’s first album, Only Built 4 Cuban Linx, relied heavily on Mafia themes and drug-dealing scenarios and became a classic in the subgenre of cocaine rap. Yet without RZA’s production, Raekwon’s commercial success faltered in his subsequent albums. Immobilarity and The Lex Diamond Story established more distance between Raekwon and Wu-Tang Clan, but they made less of an impact commercially, leaving many listeners to wonder if RZA’s work in the studio formed a key part of Raekwon’s appeal as an MC. Raekwon reunited with the Wu-Tang Clan in 2000 and 2001 to make the albums The W and Iron Flag, and even though he had worked with outside producers, Immobilarity did not signal a rift between Raekwon and Ghostface. Raekwon appeared on tracks on Ghostface’s solo albums Ironman and Bulletproof Wallets, and Ghostface appeared on two tracks from Raekwon’s third solo album, 2003’s The Lex Diamond Story, which tells the story of Raekwon’s comic book character alter ego.

Raekwon spent 2006 producing three mixtapes: Vatican, Da Vinci Code: Vatican Mixtape V2, and, with DJ Thoro, Heroin Only. He also appears on an Ill Bill mixtape released that same year. Listeners speculate that these tapes contain rough versions of songs that will eventually be released on Raekwon’s forthcoming fourth solo album, Only Built 4 Cuban Linx II, which promises production from RZA and Dr. Dre as well as an appearance by Ghostface. Raekwon promises that this Cuban Linx sequel will be a return to the style of his debut album, and the music for which he is most respected. He released rough versions of several new tracks in 2006 on his Vatican and Vatican II mixtapes. Raekwon released these mixtapes in limited quantity on his own Ice Water Records, in order to build hype for his new album. A release date for Only Built 4 Cuban Linx II has not been announced.

GHOSTFACE KILLAH

Ghostface Killah (Dennis Coles) wore a mask in the photos included in Enter the Wu-Tang and in each video from the clan’s first album. The rumor was
that he had warrants and didn’t want to be recognized by the authorities, but his image created a new feature of hip hop, the secret identity. The secret identity and mask would be picked up by underground artist MF DOOM, who would later collaborate with Ghostface on his 2006 album *Fishscale*, and on Cartoon Network’s *Dangerdoom* album, for which Ghostface and MF DOOM recorded “The Mask.” Ghostface grew up reading comic books and alternatively calls himself Tony Starks, the billionaire whose secret identity is the superhero Ironman (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Comic Books). Ghostface Killah revealed his face to the world on the cover of Raekwon’s album *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*.

**Hip Hop and Comic Books**

*Mickey Hess and Jessica Elliott*

Ghostface Killah borrowed the Marvel character Ironman for the title of his debut album. In keeping with Ghostface’s fascination with secret identities (he wore a mask in all the publicity photos taken for Wu-Tang Clan’s first album), he often calls himself not only Ironman but Tony Starks, the billionaire who secretly fights evil as Ironman.

Ghostface is not the only Wu-Tang member to create a comic book hero (or villain) identity. RZA’s comic book personality is Bobby Digital. Raekwon’s is Lex Diamond. RZA explains the relationship between rappers and comic book characters in *The Wu-Tang Manual*, saying that growing up with a single parent in the projects, kids often want to imagine a powerful, protective second self. They read comic books and want to find the superhero within. Clark Kent was a completely different person than Superman, just as Tony Starks is a completely different person than Ironman, and Bobby Digital is a completely different person than RZA. Bobby Digital was RZA’s public way to be the person he grew up as rather than the rap star.

In 1999, the Wu-Tang Clan developed its own comic book series. In it, each member is portrayed as his comic book persona, and each member had a say in his character. Method Man appears in the series as MZA, Ol’ Dirty Bastard as Osirus, and U-God as Golden Arms. This trend of MCs borrowing identities from comic books extends beyond Wu-Tang Clan. Deltron 3030, an alter ego of Del the Funky Homosapien, is a futuristic rap superhero. MF DOOM borrows both his name and disguise from Marvel Comics’ Dr. Doom. DOOM, one of underground hip hop’s hottest MCs and producers, has become a Wu affiliate as well as an honorary member of Spitkickers, the collective consisting of De La Soul, Talib Kweli, A Tribe Called Quest, Dave Chappelle, and many other entertainers. DOOM has worked with RZA on a track for Think Differently’s *Wu-Tang Meets Indie Culture*, and produced tracks for Ghostface’s *Fishscale*. 
Ghostface’s first solo album, *Ironman*, introduced the superhero persona he borrowed from Marvel Comics. This album’s standout single was the pensive “All That I Got (Is You),” a tribute to Ghostface’s mother, who kept her large family together after Ghostface’s father left home when his son was six years old. Like Tupac’s album *Strictly for my N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, Ghostface’s *Ironman* shifts from a tribute to his mother to songs that disrespect women, including a revenge fantasy on an ex-girlfriend. In other songs, the album continues the samples of blaxploitation films and gangster films like *Scarface* that had begun on *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*.

Ghostface’s second album, *Supreme Clientele*, marks his maturation as an MC. Working closely with RZA as well as producers DJ Premier and the Beatnuts, Ghostface delivers an album full of complex wordplay. The use of horns on songs like “Apollo Kids” and *Ironman*’s “260,” a track built around a sample of horns from an Al Green song, makes his urgent vocal delivery sound more dramatic. From buying sneakers from a street vendor (“Apollo Kids”) to jumping off ledges (“Ghost Deini”) to dissing Sony Record Executive Tommy Mottola (“Cherchez la Ghost”), Ghostface shows his range of topics and styles.

By 2006, Ghost had matched RZA’s level as the most productive member of the Wu-Tang Clan, and he remains one of the most inventive. Ghostface is now working with a crew called the Theodore Unit, which includes up-and-coming MC Trife da God. In 2005 and 2006, Ghost appeared in a series of MTV2 commercials called “The World According to Pretty Toney,” where he spoke about such topics as stretching his dollars to buy food in his younger days. Ghostface appeared on a 2005 episode of MTV’s *Made*, in which Blizzard, a sixteen-year-old hopeful MC visits Ghost in the recording studio. Ghost shows him a stack of notebooks and encourages him to write every day. This advice fits with Ghost’s own agenda. Between 2004 and 2006, he released two full-length solo albums, *The Pretty Toney Album* and *Fishscale*, as well as a Theodore Unit album and a Ghostface and Trife da God album, each of which featured Ghostface’s vocals and production work.

On 2006’s *Fishscale*, Ghostface worked with producers Pete Rock, MF DOOM, and J Dilla. Dilla died from a lupus-related illness before *Fishscale* was released, and shortly after the release of his own album, *Donuts*. 

Further Resources

Dilla, only thirty-three years old, was part of Slum Village and the production team the Umma, which first gained fame for its work on the Pharcyde's *Bizarre Ride II the Pharcyde* and A Tribe Called Quest’s fourth album, *Beats, Rhymes, and Life*. His production relied heavily on samples of sixties and seventies funk, soul, and R&B, and added a new level of dramatics to Ghostface’s music. Pete Rock, producer and half of the group Pete Rock and CL Smooth, created an upbeat club hit and mixtape favorite with his track for Ghostface’s “Be Easy.” *Fishscale* is named for a form of pure, uncut heroin, the title indicating that Ghostface was returning to his roots with raw, straight-ahead rhymes and beats. Aside from providing a metaphor for his music style, *Fishscale* also returns to the stories of drug trafficking for which Ghostface was known on Raekwon’s *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx* and his own *Ironman*.

**METHOD MAN**

Method Man (Clifford Sparks) also goes by Johnny Blaze, Ticalian Stallion, and Mef. He spent his childhood between his father’s home on Long Island and his mother’s home on Staten Island, where he’d meet fellow members of the Wu-Tang Clan. Method Man went on to become one of the most recognizable members of the group, in part because of the track titled “Method Man” from *Enter the Wu-Tang*. The song stands out on Wu-Tang’s debut album as a radio-friendly alternative to the darker, grittier sound of the rest of the album. Adapting the chorus from Hall and Oates’s “Method of Modern Love,” Method Man begins his song chanting “M-E-T-H-O-D...” This single established Method Man’s potential to cross over to the pop charts while maintaining his hip hop credentials with Wu-Tang. As one of the most radio-friendly members of the group, Method Man is careful never to stray too far from the dark, gritty production for which RZA and Wu-Tang are known. His first solo album, *Tical*, returns to this sound and relies heavily on beats produced by RZA.

Method Man was the first Wu-Tang member to release a solo album after the group’s debut, *Enter the Wu-Tang*. Taking advantage of the flexibility of the group’s record contract with Loud, he signed as a solo artist to the legendary Def Jam label. Ghostface Killah would follow his bandmate to Def Jam with 2004’s *The Pretty Toney Album*, after working with a series of other labels. As a breakout solo artist, Method Man emphasized that he remained a member of Wu-Tang Clan. The cover of his debut album featured the Wu-Tang logo’s W flipped to form an M. This visual consistency with the Wu-Tang logo would continue with GZA’s solo album and later with Raekwon and Masta Killa. As the first solo album from a Wu-Tang member since the group officially formed, *Tical* featured Method Man’s fellow Wu-Tang members prominently. One track, “Meth vs. Chef” featured a studio rhyme
battle between Method Man and Raekwon. The message was clear: Method Man had not left Wu-Tang to pursue a solo album. Instead, his solo album was an extension of the Wu-Tang Clan’s overall musical project.

In keeping with the Wu-Tang’s focus on taking New York City rhyme styles new places and Method Man’s own “mad different methods,” Tical begins with the line “I got styles, all of ‘em sick.” Tical celebrates Method Man’s love of marijuana and his loyalty to his girlfriend. In the music video for “All I Need,” Method Man robs a convenience store to steal a box of tampons for her. Tical had platinum sales, and its single, “Bring the Pain,” just missed reaching Top 40 status. Method Man released a second single, “I’ll Be There for You/You’re All I Need to Get By,” which featured R&B singer Mary J. Blige. The song made it into the pop Top 5 and gave Method Man major commercial exposure. As a Def Jam artist, Method Man began to work with Redman, a loud, funny MC from Newark, New Jersey. Redman was discovered by Erick Sermon of EPMD, and rhymed with Sermon’s Def Squad, a group of three MCs (Sermon, Redman, and Keith Murray), who scored a hit with their cover of Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight.” In November 1994, Def Jam released Method Man’s Tical and Redman’s Dare Iz a Darkside one week apart.

On the Wu-Tang Clan’s live DVD, Disciples of the 36 Chambers, Redman joins Method Man onstage to perform “Da Rockwilder.” In 1995, Method Man recorded the single “How High” with Redman, and it made it into Billboard’s Top 20. In 1999, Redman and Method Man collaborated to release an album, BlackOut, which showcased how well their rhyme styles and senses of humor fit together. In videos, the duo dressed up like the Blues Brothers and like Beavis and Butthead. Redman and Method Man went on to work together on a film, How High, and a short-lived television sitcom, Method and Red. How High is a college film in the tradition of Animal House, and the cinema format allowed Method Man and Redman to showcase their irreverent drug humor farther than the Fox Network censors could allow on Method and Red.

Method Man’s acting skills are not limited to comedy. After the release of Wu-Tang’s group album The W, Method Man spent a lot of time trying to launch his acting career. His first major acting role was in Hype Williams’s 1998 film Belly. In 2001, Method Man played a character on the HBO series Oz. In 2003, he played himself alongside other Wu members in Scary Movie 3. In 2004, he had roles in My Baby’s Daddy, Garden State, and Soul Plane.

Method Man released his second solo album, Tical 2000: Judgement Day, in 1998. This album features both a variety of guest rappers and producers and skits between songs. Tical 2000: Judgement Day focuses its songs and lyrics on the Armageddon that many people believed would occur at the turn of the millennium. In the album’s cover art and the music video for the title track, “Judgement Day,” Method Man borrows futuristic, postapocalyptic images from sources such as the Mad Max film trilogy to present a world
destroyed by war and disease. The album, like so many Wu-Tang albums, begins with a lengthy spoken narration in which Method Man describes the bombs, pestilence, and death that set the scene for the songs on his album. Songs like “Perfect World,” featuring Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes of TLC fame, extend this theme of a world destroyed. Even with the dark themes that drive the album, Method Man also maintains the humor for which he became known on Wu-Tang’s debut album and in his acting career. The album features several skits with celebrity guests such as Chris Rock, Janet Jackson, and Donald Trump.

Method Man’s third solo album, Tical 0: The Prequel, was released in 2004. Though he had recorded twenty RZA-produced tracks for the album, Def Jam decided to include only one of those on the final copy. Though this album contained the successful single, “What’s Happenin’,” featuring Busta Rhymes, it was not well received by his fans. Meth later complained that Def Jam had too much influence on the album’s direction. It had a commercialized sound and featured guest rappers Missy Elliott, P. Diddy, and Ludacris. Method Man’s fourth solo album, 4:21 . . . The Day After, was released in 2006.

INSPECTAH DECK

Inspectah Deck (Jason Hunter) is one of the less prominent solo members of the Wu-Tang Clan, yet his verses on the group’s albums are some of the more memorable. Deck got his nickname because of his quiet and thoughtful demeanor. He was a part of all of the Wu-Tang group albums, but he was featured more prominently in the group’s first two albums, MCing in hit singles “C.R.E.A.M.” and “Protect Your Neck.” His verse begins “Triumph,” the epic first single from Wu-Tang’s highly anticipated sophomore album, Wu-Tang Forever. Deck’s line, “I bomb atomically,” which opens that song, initiates one of the classic rhymes associated with Wu-Tang Clan.

Deck was born in Brooklyn but grew up in Staten Island, where he attended school with some of the other members of the Wu-Tang Clan. He lived in the Park Hill projects at 160, an address that comes up in many Wu-Tang lyrics, often pronounced “one-six-ooh.” In The Wu-Tang Manual, RZA explains that 160 was the best place to get weed in Staten Island. Anyone who smoked would go to 160 to get their weed, and this is where Deck lived. He had just been released from prison when the group started recording their debut album.

Deck, along with U-God and Masta Killa, was one of the last three group members to release a solo album. His album, Uncontrolled Substance, was originally scheduled for release in 1995 but was not actually released until 1999. However, besides working on the group albums, Deck was featured on many of the other members’ solo albums, including Raekwon’s Only Built 4
Cuban Linx and GZA’s Liquid Swords. Inspectah Deck is both an MC and a producer. He produced the track “Visionz” from the Wu-Tang Clan’s 1997 album Wu-Tang Forever. He also produced most of his first solo album, Uncontrolled Substance, which heavily featured other Wu-Tang members. It was well received and made it into the Top 5 on the R&B music charts. It was completely different from most of the other Wu-Tang solo and group albums in that its style was influenced by 1970s funk. When Deck released his second solo album, The Movement, in 2003, he moved away from the funk style and created an album that would be better accepted commercially.

In between his first and second albums, Deck helped to produce some tracks and MC some verses in GZA’s Beneath the Surface, RZA’s Bobby Digital in Stereo, and Method Man’s Tical 2000: Judgement Day. Additionally, he played himself in the 1998 movie Black and White. Though it was attributed to the entire group, he produced and MCed the song “Let Me at Them” from the soundtrack for the 1995 movie Tales from the Hood.

MASTA KILLA

Masta Killa (Elgin Turner) was the only member of the Wu-Tang Clan who wasn’t an MC before the group was formed. He was the last of the nine members to join Wu-Tang, and he narrowly beat out Killah Priest to record a verse for Enter the Wu-Tang’s “Da Mystery of Chessboxin’.” At the time the album was produced, he was in prison, so that was the only song in which he appeared on Wu-Tang’s debut. However, after he was released from prison, he contributed to all of the Wu-Tang albums that followed. Within the Wu-Tang Clan, a group dedicated to dominating the record industry, Masta Killa provides fewer vocals than any of the other members.

Masta Killa also was the last of Wu-Tang’s nine members to release a solo album. As a comment on his laid-back approach to making the record, he titled his debut album No Said Date. On the title track, a voice asks Masta Killa when his album is dropping, and he replies “No said date.” This album finally debuted in 2004, more than a decade after the release of Wu-Tang’s first group album. Masta Killa’s vocal style matches his approach to his career. Out of Wu-Tang’s nine MCs, his delivery is most laid-back. Standing in stark opposition to Method Man’s energy, Ghostface and RZA’s urgency, or Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s frenzy, Masta Killa’s vocals take on a very casual sound. His subject matter and fashion style are also distinctive within the group. While he isn’t the oldest member of the clan—GZA was born in 1966, three years earlier—Masta Killa often comments on his age in lyrics, in lines like “I was rollin’, showing my age, unshaven” and on “D.T.D.,” where he says, “Got the old man feeling twenty-three.”

Aside from Wu-Tang releases, Masta Killa has been involved in a lot of projects in the music industry, collaborating with Afu-Ra, Bounty Killer, and
Vegetarian Rappers
Danielle Hess

Vegetarianism is not a subject typically paired with hip hop. However, there are over a dozen rappers and producers who refuse to eat meat, including Andre 3000, Jeru the Damaja, Common, Prodigy of Mobb Deep, KRS-One, and Wu-Tang Clan’s Masta Killa and RZA. Many hip hop stars such as Ice Cube follow Islamic dietary guidelines that omit pork from their diets, and Muslim rappers Mos Def and Q-Tip are entirely vegetarian. The dead prez song “Be Healthy” boasts the health benefits of vegetarianism and speaks out against the poor lifestyle decisions made in black America regarding food and drink.

Russell Simmons, cofounder of Def Jam and a hip hop producer and impresario, is a vegan who is a member of PETA’s campaign against Kentucky Fried Chicken and has been very vocal against slaughterhouses and factory farms. Simmons provided some of his favorite recipes for vegan versions of the soul food staples hush puppies, ribs, hoppin’ John, and sweet potato pie for the spring 2000 issue of PETA’s Animal Times, a magazine mailed to their members. While serving as the founder and manager of his hip hop clothing company Phat Farm, Simmons was asked to design new uniforms for McDonald’s to boost their image. He immediately issued a press release noting that he would never work with the fast-food restaurant since it is against his vegan lifestyle. Ironically, Phat Farm Shoes did market a line of leather goods while under Simmons’s management. Public Enemy. In the film industry, he played himself in the 1999 film, Black and White. In 2006, Masta Killa joined forces with PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), creating advertisements explaining his stance against eating meat and wearing fur. His vegetarianism extends to his lyrics as well; on fellow vegetarian RZA’s song “Grits,” Masta Killa touts Morning-star veggie bacon (see sidebar: Vegetarian Rappers).

U-GOD

U-God (Lamont Hawkins) was the eighth Wu-Tang member to release a solo album. Golden Arms Redemption, released in 1999, was an album, like those of RZA, Raekwon, and Ghostface, that was written as his comic book personality, Golden Arms. U-God was in jail for drug possession during most of the recording of Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers) but was released in time to be included in the recording of two tracks: “Protect Your Neck” and “Da Mystery of Chessboxin’.” His verse sets off “Chessboxin’” with U-God’s signature growl: “Raw I’mma give it to ya.” This gruff delivery made him a prominent MC on the group’s second album, Wu-Tang Forever. In the video for “Triumph,” U-God rhymes while hanging by one arm from a burning tree.
On one track from *Wu-Tang Forever*, “A Better Tomorrow,” U-God raps about how his son was accidentally shot and injured. In his lyrics, U-God expresses remorse for his own actions that he felt contributed to his son’s injury. With 2001’s *The W*, U-God shone on a remix of “The Jump Off,” a song that featured all of the Wu-Tang members except for Ol’ Dirty Bastard. As U-God’s verse begins, RZA fades out all the music except for the sparse drumbeat that forms the backbone of the track. U-God’s rhythm over nothing but drums recalls earlier days of MCs rhyming over breakbeats or drum machines, and RZA’s technique of dropping out the horns and guitar showcases the uniqueness of U-God’s flow.

In *The Wu-Tang Manual*, RZA asserts that U-God is known for his temper. In 2004, U-God engaged in a very public battle with RZA over royalties. Their disagreement was aired over the radio, and RZA later claimed that U-God had started the argument as a publicity stunt. However, U-God later went on to record the album, *Ugodz-Illa Presents: The Hillside Scramblers*, with four other MCs. He also released a DVD, *Rise of a Fallen Soldier*, that documented his complaints against RZA and the Wu-Tang Clan.

U-God and RZA eventually reconciled their disagreements, and U-God went on tour with Wu-Tang in the summer of 2004. In 2005, he released his second solo album, *Mr. Xcitement*. Soon afterward, he again started a dispute with RZA but resolved it in time to be a part of Wu-Tang’s Ol’ Dirty Bastard memorial tour in 2006.

**THE WU SAGA CONTINUES**

Wu-Tang’s legacy is built not only from the vocal talents of its nine MCs and the innovative production of RZA but from a business model that centers on the strength of the collective. Hip hop is a very collaborative form, with groups often including the terms clique (often spelled “click” in hip hop circles), clan, crew, squad, camp, unit, and posse in their names. Collectives such as Marley Marl’s Juice Crew, 50 Cent’s G-Unit, Buckshot’s Boot Camp Click, Outkast’s Dungeon Family, Michael Watts’s Swisha House, and Del the Funky Homosapien’s Hieroglyphics center on a tight-knit group of artists, bound together by a common hip hop aesthetic.

The 2001 hit “The Jump Off” proved that Wu-Tang Clan still could produce a posse cut. Although Ol’ Dirty Bastard was in prison at the time of the recording, Inspectah Deck references him in lyrics, suggesting that the group will send half the song’s profits to their incarcerated bandmate. Dirty also is absent from the back cover photo of Wu-Tang Clan on *The W*. RZA, posed in the middle of the shot, holds a black bandana with his cousin’s hip hop initials: “ODB.”

On July 17, 2004, Wu-Tang Clan recorded a live concert in San Bernadino, California, for the DVD *Disciples of the 36 Chambers*. This was the first show
that all nine Wu-Tang members had come together for in seven years, and it
would prove to be the group’s last. Outside the stadium, fans were surprised to
learn that Ol’ Dirty Bastard would perform on stage with Wu-Tang. He had
begun to skip out on concert appearances with the group, and in an interview
featured on the DVD, RZA says that while ODB had wanted to remain in his
hotel room, other group members encouraged him to perform. In the concert
footage, Ol’ Dirty Bastard was visibly deteriorating. He had been out of prison
for just over a year. He was wearing his new Roc-A-Fella Records shirt, and he
spent most of the concert sitting down. At times he appeared exhausted, con-
fused, and disoriented. Unlike the other Wu-Tang members, the DVD features
no interviews with Ol’ Dirty, who died less than four months later. Ghostface
Killah pays tribute to ODB by performing his “Shimmy Shimmy Ya” in concert
footage included on the 2005 Ghostface and Trife da God CD and DVD Put It
on the Line, released by Ghost’s own Starks Enterprises label.

Wu-Tang’s legacy is secured with their mainstream sales and their under-
ground credibility. In 2005, Dreddy Kruger produced Wu-Tang Meets Indie
Culture, a CD that paired Wu-Tang MCs with artists from the world of
underground hip hop, including MF DOOM and Del the Funky Homosapien.
Members of the Wu-Tang Clan have been highly successful, both as a group
and as solo artists, but it hasn’t been without struggle. After making an abrupt
exit from their tour with Rage Against the Machine in 1997, the group was
sued by a record store employee who alleged that four members of the group
had beaten and robbed him after an August concert in Illinois. During the
same tour, they were charged when, after asking people to get on stage,
people rushed onto the floor, and many attendees were hurt. These charges
were later dropped. In 1998, the group was sued by a dancer who was hired
to appear in one of their videos. She claimed that members of the group made
derogatory comments about her and held her against her will. In 2000, the
group was sued by their lawyer for breach of contract after they failed to pay
the legal fees that accrued during the lawsuit brought by the dancer. Then
there were the many legal problems for the individual group members, parti-
cularly Ol’ Dirty Bastard.

In 2005, the Wu-Tang Clan regrouped to create a new album, their first
since Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s death. Though they recorded a few songs, the album
was cancelled, or postponed, due to scheduling conflicts. It’s been reported
that some of the tracks they recorded will be included on Raekwon’s Only
Built 4 Cuban Linx II. In 2006, Wu-Tang Clan grouped together to form a
tour, also the first without Ol’ Dirty Bastard. The tour lasted less than two
weeks in February 2006, and it was dedicated in memory of Ol’ Dirty Bas-
tard. The group wanted to celebrate ODB’s life and prove that, even though
they’d lost one of their members, they were still connected as a group. A part
of the proceeds of the ticket sales from the tour were donated to ODB’s
family. In an interview with Shaheem Reid of MTV News, Raekwon
explained that he thinks ODB would have wanted the group to continue
working together in order to make a living. “At the end of the day,” he said, “the show must go on.”

See also: The Geto Boys, Nas

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FURTHER RESOURCES


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Inspectah Deck


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Masta Killa


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Ol’ Dirty Bastard


Ghostface Killah

Ironman. Sony, 1996.

U-God

Mr. Xcitement. Free Agency Media, 2005.
deny the complexities of the late Tupac Amaru Shakur. While he was re-
spected by many for his thug anthems, he was equally loved and hated for
his lyrics about women (some inspiringly positive, others dreadfully negative),
his willingness to speak his mind, and his ability to share his lived experience
through the eloquent imagery evident in his music, in his poetry, and even in his movie roles. Tupac lived a life that exemplified contrast and, even in death, the contradiction that is Tupac Shakur continues to raise questions and fuel debates about his actions and choices in life. After his death, Tupac has managed to increase his fan base as loyal listeners have shared his music with others and introduced a new generation to Tupac through his poetry and his posthumous music releases.

There is something about Tupac that lives on. His murder could not destroy his music, and that truth lies in the fact that he became bigger than the East Coast–West Coast feud he helped to create (see sidebar: East Coast versus West Coast), bigger than his music and his personal style, even bigger than

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**East Coast versus West Coast**

*Carlos D. Morrison and Celnisha L. Dangerfield*

Although Tupac was born and raised on the East Coast, he had strong allegiance to the West Coast. In fact, in many ways he became the face of the West Coast with songs such as “California Love” and “To Live and Die in L. A.” In addition, Tupac managed to become the unofficial representative of Death Row Records (especially after the departure of superproducer Dr. Dre). It should not have been a surprise then that a feud between Tupac and Biggie would evolve into a feud between Death Row Records and Bad Boy Records, and eventually create a binary split between hip hop music on two coasts. While rivalries among hip hop artists have been a part of the culture since its inception in the 1970s, none captured more attention than the East Coast–West Coast feud that began as a personal beef between Tupac and Biggie. Many speculate that the media coverage played a large part in hyping the growing feud, but in any case, the East Coast–West Coast feud would be felt by hip hop heads worldwide.

On November 30, 1994, Tupac was shot five times at a New York recording studio. He publicly blamed Biggie Smalls and Bad Boy Records for the shooting. The two record labels, Bad Boy and Death Row, were thrown into conflict as a result. This feud escalated after Suge Knight taunted Sean (Puffy) at the Source Awards in August 1995. Biggie added fuel to the fire with the song “Who Shot Ya,” while Tupac retaliated with “Hit ‘Em Up” and “Bomb First (My Second Reply).”

On September 7, 1996, Tupac was shot several times as he rode in a car with Suge Knight in Las Vegas; he died seven days later. About six months later, on March 9, 1997, Biggie was shot and killed in California. Both murders remain unsolved, and numerous theories have surfaced about what happened to each of the slain rappers. Some propose that Biggie had something to do with Tupac’s death, while others believe that someone from Tupac’s camp killed Biggie as payback.
While the East Coast–West Coast feud ended with the death of two grand contributors to hip hop, one of the positive legacies that remain from the feud is the determination to keep other artists from trudging down that same negative path. Since the days of the feud, artists such as JaRule and 50 Cent and Nas and Jay-Z have had beef, but they have managed either to squash their differences or, at the very least, confine their squabbles to the lyrics of their songs.

Further Resources


Tupac Shakur: The Formative Years

While Tupac would later claim allegiance to, and love for, the West Coast, his earlier life centered on the East Coast. Tupac was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1971 to Afeni Shakur, who, at the time of her son’s birth was a member of the Black Panthers. She named him “after an Incan chief, Tupac Amaru [which] means ‘shining serpent,’ referring to wisdom and courage. Shakur is Arabic for ‘thankful to God’” (Powell 22). As a young man, Tupac lived in a poor, female-headed household. He was exposed to crime and criminals, even within his own household. Yet despite the challenges he faced, at the age of twelve Tupac began to work with a New York acting guild. The young thespian would continue to sharpen his acting skills when the family relocated to Baltimore, Maryland, in 1986.
The family moved to Charm City because of the promise of better job opportunities for Afeni Shakur. While living there, Tupac attended the Baltimore School for Performing Arts, where he developed a greater appreciation for the arts, poetry, ballet, and jazz. He continued to hone his skills as an actor and was exposed to great literature including the work of William Shakespeare. Tupac was highly driven and showed promise at the school. He also developed a lasting friendship with another young student and budding thespian, Jada Pinkett. Both Pinkett and Shakur were highly driven, very opinionated and passionate about their work to the point that they often bumped heads. Nevertheless, Shakur and Pinkett developed an admiration and respect for each other's talents and abilities that would have a lasting effect on their lives. Jada would go on to work on the television series A Different World and star in several movies, including Jason's Lyric (1994), Set It Off (1996), The Nutty Professor (1996), The Matrix Reloaded (2003), The Matrix Revolution (2003), and Collateral (2004). She married actor-rapper Will Smith in 1997; the couple have two children and are raising Will's son from a previous marriage. Jada is now a member of the music group Wicked Wisdom and serves as an executive producer for the sitcom All of Us, a show loosely based on the experiences of her family.

Even though Tupac thrived at the performing arts school, he was unable to finish his training due to mounting concerns at home. Although Afeni Shakur moved to Baltimore to find stable employment and support her children, her battle with drug addiction created great tension between her and Tupac. The mounting violence on the streets of Baltimore also contributed to Tupac's inability to stay focused on his work and to stay out of trouble. Given the severity of the situation, it was now time for Shakur to leave Baltimore and the East Coast. Yet the events that precipitated this move would be revisited later in his life as content for some of Tupac's songs. In work such as “Dear Mama,” Tupac dealt with his childhood poverty and his mother's drug addiction. However, Tupac's deep respect for his mother's achievement in raising two kids on her own, and without the benefit of much money, surpass the negative memories of his mother. In fact, “Dear Mama” is a tribute to her and a testament to her strength. In the song's lyrics, Tupac tells his mother “You are appreciated” (see sidebar: The Mama Complex).

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**The Mama Complex**

*Carlos D. Morrison and Celnisha L. Dangerfield*

Even the hardest gangsta rapper could rhyme about shooting someone fifty times and still show reverence for his mama on the next track. Yes, the mama complex is in full effect. She is often the only woman that a rapper may seem to care about, for in the face of adversity the mother figure often stands as the
Tupac left Baltimore and headed to Marin City, California, in the Bay Area, to live with Linda Pratt, wife of Black Panther Elmer “Geronimo” Pratt. Nicknamed the Jungle, Marin City is an impoverished community across the bay from Oakland where Tupac began to sell drugs and learn even more about the streets. Tupac arrived in Marin City at the height of the crack cocaine explosion of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period of death and destruction to the lives of a multitude of young people living in the urban areas of California. The crack cocaine explosion paralleled the rise of hip hop in the Bay Area. As a result of the onslaught of drug- and gang-related violence, rappers and songwriters responded to the urban crisis in a variety of ways. Drugs and gangs were becoming common topics for songs such as the crossover hit, “The Ghetto.” This song from Too $hort’s 1990 release *Short Dog’s in the House* painted a gloomy and dark picture of urban America. R&B artist Tony! Toni! Tone! went a step further with their 1988 song “Little Walter,” a ballad about a drug dealer shot when he opened his door. With this new surge of West Coast hip hop, artists and groups like MC Hammer, Ant Banks, Capitol Tax, and Digital Underground became famous in the late eighties and early nineties. Although Hammer and Digital Underground were more focused on dance music and party music than exposing social conditions, Tupac drew material for his music from the poverty, drugs, and crime he witnessed in California. He would later use his lyrics to speak to the raging drug scene in Marin City and in the poor black communities across the country.
Tupac got his start in the music industry with Digital Underground (DU), one of the most eccentric hip hop acts of the early nineties. The group, which consisted of main members Shock-G, MC Humpty Hump, Money-B, and DJ Fuze, also included a bizarre host of revolving group members such as DJ DOT, Esenchill, Dungeon Squad, Saafir, and Big Money Otis. The group’s sound blended samples of Parliament/Funkadelic, Bootsy Collins, and Jimi Hendrix to create classic singles such as “The Humpty Dance” and “Doo-wutchyalike,” which were included on their 1989 Grammy-nominated album *Sex Packets*. These self-proclaimed “Sons of the P,” as they would title their second full-length album, were the inheritors of the P-Funk tradition. They scored another hit with *This Is an E.P. Release* in 1990. The album included the hit “Same Song,” which introduced the world to Tupac Shakur.

Tupac recorded his first verse for “Same Song,” which was also featured on the *Nothing but Trouble* soundtrack, but he began his career with Digital Underground as a roadie and dancer. The role of dancer can serve as a point of entry into the music business for some hip hop artists (e.g., the Pharcyde and Jennifer Lopez). This strategy certainly worked for Tupac, who worked as a dancer for only about a year. This helps explain why even though he enjoyed being able to “clown around with the Underground,” as he rhymes in “Same Song,” Tupac had more to say and could not remain in the shadow of DU. He decided to venture out as a solo artist, but Atron Gregory, Tupac’s manager at the time, was unable to convince Tommy Boy Management that he had what it takes to be an independent, financially viable artist. Interscope Records, however, signed Tupac and financed his debut album.

Interscope Records released *2Pacalypse Now* in 1991; it was the boost Tupac needed to propel him out of the shadows of DU and into the realm of hip hop stardom. The album included songs such as “Rebel of the Underground,” “Trapped” (featuring Shock-G), and “Young Black Male.” However, it was “Brenda’s Got a Baby” that truly caught the attention of the hip hop community. In the song, Tupac’s Brenda is a dope fiend who gives up her newborn for drugs and sex and is later found dead. The song is a powerful testament of the grittiness of life in urban America, which Tupac witnessed in Baltimore and later in Marin City.

*2Pacalypse Now* reached number thirteen on the R&B charts and was certified gold in 1995. However, the lyrics on the album became the center of a national debate. Vice President Dan Quayle brought attention to the album during his bid for reelection, noting inappropriate lyrics, specifically Tupac’s comments about killing cops on “Soulja’s Story.” Tupac was not the first rap artist to let his fantasies of revenge on police officers play out in lyrics. N.W.A. got the FBI’s attention with “Fuck tha Police,” Paris recorded “Coffee, Donuts, and Death,” and perhaps most infamously, Ice-T’s heavy metal group Body Count was boycotted by a Texas police group after they...
released the single “Cop Killer.” Body Count ultimately was forced to remove the song from their album.

Tupac’s notoriety grew with the release of his second album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (1993), his third, *Thug Life* (1994), and his fourth, *Me Against the World* (1995). Yet it was Tupac’s 1996 album, *All Eyez on Me*, that sparked his rise to iconic status. This record would become hip hop’s first double CD, with twenty-eight cuts, including “California Love” and “How Do U Want It.” The album finished number one in the R&B and pop category and was certified platinum seven times. It was with the release of this album that Tupac became a major player at Death Row Records, the label founded by West Coast gangsta rap legend Dr. Dre, and former gang member and NFL player Marion “Suge” Knight.

The prison imagery conjured by the name Death Row fits Tupac when one considers his numerous run-ins with the law. Tupac was accused of shooting two police officers in Atlanta, but the charges were dismissed. He served time for assaulting directors Allen and Albert Hughes. However, one of his most significant cases came in the form of sodomy and sexual abuse charges in November 1993. Tupac and his friends were accused of sexually assaulting a twenty-year-old woman. The woman alleged that she had consensual sex with Shakur before the incident in question, but when she went to visit his hotel room for the second time, she was sexually abused by members of Tupac’s entourage. Even though Tupac maintained that he was asleep when the incident occurred, Tupac was formally accused of sexual abuse and sodomy and tried in a court of law. On November 31, 1994, the day before the jury would deliver its verdict, Tupac was shot five times in the lobby of a Manhattan recording studio. The next day, against his doctor’s orders, Tupac arrived at the courthouse bandaged and in a wheelchair. He was found guilty of sexual abuse, and served eleven months in jail. It was while he was serving time for this crime that the album *Me Against the World* was released. In October 1995, his case got an appeal and he was released on bond through money supplied by Suge Knight, with the condition that Tupac sign to his label, Death Row.

Less than a year later, on September 7, 1996, Tupac would be shot five times in a drive-by shooting as he rode in a car with Knight. He died seven days later, on September 13, 1996.

C. DELORES TUCKER: TUPAC’S CENSORSHIP NEMESIS DURING HIS LIFE AND AFTER DEATH

One of the most vocal opponents of Tupac Shakur’s gangsta rap lyrics was C. Delores Tucker, the founder and chair of the National Congress of Black Women and the first black woman to serve as Pennsylvania’s Secretary of State (1971–1977). Tucker and Dan Quayle were critics of Tupac’s music,
particularly the controversial album *2Pacalypse Now*, which was released in 1991. While Tupac billed the recording as a socially conscious album that addressed the plight of young black males in America, political leaders and law enforcement officers denounced the album for its violence against the police. The fury over the album increased after it was reported that the song “Soulja’s Story” allegedly inspired a young man to kill a Texas state trooper. This incident led former Vice President Quayle to suggest that the album “has no place in our society.” Pac would later sample Quayle’s statement on his follow-up, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, where he dedicates the songs “Point the Finger” and “Souljah’s Revenge” to responding to his critics.

In 1994, criticism of Tupac Shakur and other gangsta rappers’ lyrics would culminate in congressional hearings on gangsta rap in Washington, D.C. Tucker, along with conservative Republican William Bennett and U.S. senators Joseph Lieberman and Sam Nunn, began a four-year crusade to rid society of a genre of music they deemed to be “pornographic smut.” Snoop Doggy Dogg’s *Doggystyle* and Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* came under heavy scrutiny by Tucker and her cohorts during the hearings sponsored by the Committee on Energy and Commerce’s Subcommittee on Commerce, Competitiveness, and Consumer Protection. Tucker was particularly critical of Tupac, and Tupac responded in kind in his lyrics. Nearly a year after Shakur’s death in 1996, Tucker filed a defamation lawsuit against Tupac’s estate accusing the slain hip hop artist of slander, invasion of privacy, and emotional stress. Nevertheless, the lawsuit was thrown out by U.S. District Judge Ronald Buckwalter in 1999; the judge wrote that while the statements were inappropriate, they did not qualify as slander (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Censorship).

### Hip Hop and Censorship

*Jessica Elliott*

In 1985, after her purchase of Prince’s album *Purple Rain*, Tipper Gore, wife of then-Senator Al Gore, cofounded the Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC). They were responsible for the laws that required parental advisory warnings on records that were deemed inappropriate for young listeners.

By 1990, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) announced that it had created a uniform parental advisory sticker that would appear on the covers of albums with explicit content. More hip hop albums received parental advisory stickers than any other music genre—some albums being labeled with warnings for no apparent reason. In the same year, *Newsweek* published an article called “The Rap Attitude” (Adler and Foote). Appearing as a cover story, this article was more editorial than news report, and mostly represented its authors’ views on rap music. While references were made to certain rock and roll groups, overall the article focused on classifying rap music as a negative influence promoting anger, stereotyping, and disrespect for authority.
The amount of attention drawn to rap music in 1990 by both the PMRC and *Newsweek* preceded the arrest and trial of Miami’s 2 Live Crew. In June, a Florida judge declared that the group’s album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* violated obscenity laws. No other record in American history had drawn such a charge. Laws immediately went into effect that prohibited the sale of the album, and, later that week, three members of the group were arrested for performing songs from the album live at a local concert.

2 Live Crew was ultimately acquitted, and some jurors were even reported to have laughed during the hearing when excerpts from the group’s album were played (Anderson 29). Yet the 2 Live Crew decision did not dissuade the PMRC from their attempts to censor hip hop, and the PMRC isn’t the only group to promote such censorship. Dr. C. Delores Tucker, a feminist advocate against rap music, claimed in the 1990s that the lyrics in many hip hop songs both promoted violence against and were derogatory toward African American women. Her anti-rap activities included buying shares in Time Warner so that she could attend the shareholders’ meeting and protest the company’s production of hip hop albums. In 1994, she protested outside of the NAACP after they nominated Tupac Shakur for an Image Award.

Dr. Tucker and her husband, William Tucker, filed a lawsuit against the estate of Tupac Shakur for remarks made about her on his album, *All Eyez on Me*. Shakur’s lyrics were a rebuttal of Dr. Tucker’s protest of his Image Award nomination. In addition to Dr. Tucker’s claims that statements in the album were slanderous and defamatory, Mr. Tucker took part in the lawsuit by claiming that Shakur’s lyrics resulted in Dr. Tucker’s lack of interest in sex. Dr. Tucker planned to use money from her lawsuit to pursue further censorship of hip hop music, but the court ruled in favor of Shakur’s estate.

*Works Cited*


*Further Resources*


The two songs on *All Eyez on Me* that mentioned Tucker were “How Do U Want It” and “Wonder Why They Call U Bitch.” In “Wonder Why They Call U Bitch,” Tupac discusses the promiscuity and gold-digging that, from Tupac’s vantage point, leads certain women to be rightfully labeled bitches.
Furthermore, Tupac suggests that these women should instead get an education so that they can become financially independent. C. Delores Tucker’s name is mentioned only at the end of the song. Notably, Tupac never calls her a bitch, but rather attempts to explain to Tucker why some women, but not all, are considered bitches. Gines asserts that “Tucker misunderstands Tupac; he is criticizing the unequal exchange of sex for money. He isn’t attempting to reduce all women to bitches and hos” (94). Thus, it seems that Tucker had mistaken Tupac’s social commentary, albeit vulgar, for an attack on her person.

However, in the song, “How Do U Want It,” Tupac does in fact attack Tucker by calling her names and saying that she’s out to “destroy a brother.” Here, Tupac is employing a rhetorical strategy used by black revolutionists called vilification, which is “the use of harsh language against a single conspicuous leader of the opposition with the intent of belittling [her] before the community” (Smith 12). Having inherited a black revolutionary ethos from his mother, Afeni, it is not surprising that Tupac would use such a tactic in his lyrics to attack a woman who sought to censor his life’s work. Gines further posits that what we also see in the lyrics of this song is “Tupac evoking the image of the emasculated Black woman who, despite any merits in her position is always . . . trying to pull brothers down” (96).

**TUPAC THE ACTOR**

With sexual abuse charges looming, other court cases pending, and even in the midst of a bicoastal feud, Tupac managed to appear in several films during his short life. By the time of his death, he had starred in *Juice* (1992), *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Above the Rim* (1994), *Bullet* (1996), and *Gang Related* (1997). His last film was *Gridlock’d* (1997), which was released posthumously. Unlike many rapper-turned-actors, Tupac actually had training in dramatic performance. Tupac saw opportunities to act as more than a way to make money. Producer Preston Holmes, who worked with Tupac on the movies *Juice* and *Gridlock’d*, has suggested that Shakur was interested in getting black youths in particular to read and think critically about societal issues affecting them. However, this notion is juxtaposed with the fact that Tupac was kicked off the film *Menace II Society* because of an altercation with the directors, Allen and Albert Hughes. His contradictory nature becomes evident early on in that while he wanted to enhance the critical thinking skills of moviegoers, he could not maintain the self-control to stay out of a fight with the film’s directors.

In many ways, Tupac’s acting roles beg the question, “Does art imitate life?” His characters often possessed many of the same characteristics he did, or lived lives that were very similar to his earlier years. In analyzing Tupac’s first movie role, one gets a clearer sense of how Tupac used his
acting career to reinforce the image he created initially through his music. His first movie role was Bishop, in the movie *Juice* (1992). *Juice* was the story of four young teens: Bishop, Q, Raheem, and Steel. The teens from Harlem, New York, skip school one day only to find that one of their old friends has been killed in a shootout at a bar. After learning of this tragic incident, Bishop tells his friends that they have no “juice” or respect. In order to get respect, the four teens rob a corner grocery story and Bishop shoots and kills the store clerk for no apparent reason. After the shooting of the store clerk, the four young black males run into an alley where Raheem tells Bishop to give him the gun. A fight breaks out between Bishop and Raheem, and Raheem is shot and killed. Since the other youths know what happened, Bishop seeks to get rid of them also.

From this synopsis of the movie, one can see that Tupac’s stage identity as an outlaw or thug played out in the movie roles he landed. In *Tupac: Resurrection*, Tupac states, “Bishop is a psychopath; the character is me, I’m Bishop. Everybody got a little Bishop in them” (85). Moreover, Bishop is the quintessential thug who embodies the nihilism that exists in many urban communities in America. In his book *Race Matters*, Cornel West posits that nihilism is “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (more important) lovelessness” (4).

The streets of Harlem are a place where young black males such as Bishop learn to negotiate their survival among a variety of social vices such as illegal drugs and drug-related shootings, gang violence, illicit sex, and carjackings. In order for Bishop, as well as Q, Raheem, and Steel, to survive the streets of Harlem, they must embrace what social scientist Elijah Anderson calls the “code of the streets, which amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, including violence” (82). Anderson further suggests, “The rules prescribe both a proper comportment and a proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so allow those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way” (82).

One of the informal rules on the streets of Harlem in the movie *Juice* is that those who are deemed vulnerable, such as a shop clerk, can and will be subjected to violence and may be killed in order for kids to earn respect. This was the case with Bishop and the store clerk. By killing the store clerk, Bishop’s own sense of selfhood was affirmed in his own eyes. Another informal rule is that if a person is challenged, he must avenge himself and his honor. This was also the case between Bishop and Raheem; Raheem attempted to try Bishop by taking his gun. This was deemed by Bishop as an attack on his person, the rationalization being that Bishop’s gun was an extension of himself. In the end, the killing of Raheem serves two purposes: Bishop’s honor is restored and juice (respect) granted—that is, on a societal level; and Bishop’s friends learn that he is not to be messed with, which in turn also grants him additional juice among his peers.
Tupac's role as Bishop in *Juice* is powerful because the character he plays is only an extension of the outlaw/thug identity portrayed in his lyrics. Thus, both Bishop and Tupac lived by the Thug Life mantra. In explaining the complex relationship between Tupac the rapper and Tupac the actor, Tupac stated, “I am real. The lyrics might be a story or they might be real. But I stay real. Even when I am playing a character I’m really a character at the same time. There is nothing fake” (*Tupac Resurrection* 85). There should be no question that Bishop and all of Tupac’s other characters possess some of his own qualities. Undoubtedly, it was his realness that led him to be cast in so many movies where his thug qualities took center stage.

Tupac’s acting career gave him the ability to work with notable actors and directors such as James Belushi, Thandie Newton, Samuel L. Jackson, Regina King, Janet Jackson, and John Singleton. While he never starred in a movie with his former classmate actress Jada Pinkett, their love for acting would serve as one of the links that catapulted their relationship to deeper levels. Despite physical distance after Tupac’s move to California, incarceration, and whatever could have potentially ruined their bond, their friendship would stand the test of time and continue until Tupac’s murder.

**LITERACY AND THE DEBUNKING OF ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN RAP MUSIC**

A major contribution that Tupac made to hip hop culture involved his role in counteracting the notion that illiteracy is commonplace within the hip hop community (Dyson 99) and enhancing the plausibility of an intelligent thug. For many, prior to Tupac’s entry into the hip hop game, the idea of the intelligent thug was an impossibility, the thinking being that surely thugs do not read and have ideas rooted in deep philosophical thinking. Tupac changed this.

The importance of literacy in Tupac’s life was inherited from his mother, Afeni Shakur. As a Black Panther during the 1960s, Afeni read the literary works of Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and August Wilson. She also read classical works such as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Like his mother, Tupac was an avid reader and believed that knowledge and learning were critical to the intellectual growth and development of an individual or a people. Since the aforementioned works were in Tupac’s environment at an early age, the writers and their works had a tremendous effect on the man, his song lyrics, and his poetry.

In addition to inheriting a love for reading from Afeni, Tupac was also influenced by Leila Steinberg, a cultural critic whom Michael Eric Dyson describes as Shakur’s “literary soul mate” (92). Steinberg, a writer and producer in the music industry, conducted multicultural educational programs and afterschool workshops in the public schools of Marin City and Oakland, California. She first met Shakur in 1989 during an afterschool workshop on
writing, literature, and performance. Impressed by his love for learning as evidenced during these workshops and programs, Steinberg invited Tupac into her home for further study. The two spent many hours reading and critically reflecting on the works of various writers from a variety of disciplines. Tupac read historian William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, as well as George Orwell’s cryptic novel, 1984. In addition, Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, Niccolo Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, and Jack Kornfield’s *Teachings of the Buddha* were also part of Tupac’s reading list.

Tupac also read works in the African American literary canon. For example, Tupac read Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Roots*, Maya Angelou’s *I Shall Not Be Moved* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folks*, Assata Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography*, and Nathan McCall’s *Makes Me Wanna Holler*. Tupac was as eclectic in his approach to literature as he was in his approach to knowledge and learning. His love for reading and ideas were influenced and heightened by his interest in a variety of topics including history, spirituality, philosophy, feminism, politics, and education. In addition to reading various literary works, Tupac also participated in weekly writing circles conducted in Steinberg’s home, where he developed his skills as a literary artist and poet. One of the first poems that he wrote there was “The Rose That Grew from Concrete.” This particular poem would later have a lasting impact on hip hop culture and in academia as it would be the lead poem in a book of poetry written by Tupac and compiled by Steinberg after his death. The collection *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* was published by Pocket Books in 1999. Other poems in the book include “Life Through My Eyes,” “The Shining Star Within!,” “Black Woman,” “I Know My Heart Has Lied Before,” “2 People with 1 Wish,” “The Sun and the Moon,” “The Promise,” and “Nightmares.” Out of Tupac’s poetry flows the very heart of a man that is complex and deeper than could ever be determined by listening to his rap lyrics alone. In poems like “Jada,” he speaks about his platonic love for his dear friend Jada Pinkett, and in “UR Ripping Us Apart!!! (Dedicated 2 Crack),” Tupac not only speaks to his hurt over his mother’s struggle with crack but also demonstrates his view of Afeni Shakur as his hero, weakened as she may have been. The complexity that is Tupac becomes increasingly apparent as his sometimes misogynist lyrics are contrasted with his odes to women in some of his songs and poetry. Today, colleges and universities across the country are using Tupac’s collection of poetry in their literature courses. The University of California at Berkeley, Harvard University, and the University of Washington are but a few of the schools that have created classes that study Tupac’s work from an intellectual perspective, dissecting the writings that influenced him as well as highlighting how Tupac’s writings and lyrics have influenced others.

Both reading and writing informed Tupac’s critical consciousness. In his lyrics, hints of Tupac’s reading list emerge. In some cases, the references are
obvious, such as in the example of Shakur assuming the name of Makaveli and foreshadowing his own death on the album, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*. The album was an homage to Niccolo Machiavelli, a military theorist, playwright, historian, and diplomat who spoke of staging one’s own death in his book, *The Prince*. So while in some cases the listener could clearly identify the inspiration for Tupac’s lyrics, the listener may not have been as aware of his influences in cases like references to the writings of Shakespeare. There is no doubt, though, that Tupac was very inquisitive and he not only analyzed the ideas of others but processed them and (re)presented them in his music.

Tupac’s intellectualism had a profound impact on his rap lyrics. He was interested in using the power of rap music to educate as well as entertain members of the hip hop community. As a result of his position on educating others, his love for reading, learning, and knowledge ultimately translated into two lasting contributions to hip hop culture: Tupac further shattered the notion that hip hop culture is anti-intellectual, and Tupac encouraged youths in the culture to read and think critically: “Tupac’s profound literacy rebutted the belief that hip-hop is an intellectual wasteland. [Shakur] helped to combat the anti-intellectualism in rap, a force to be sure, that pervades the entire culture” (Dyson 99). Tupac’s influence can be seen today in the thought-provoking lyrics of hip hop artists such as Erykah Badu, Common, Jill Scott, and Kanye West. These artists all evoke thoughtful consideration of their lyrics. For example, in the song “Bag Lady,” Erykah Badu encourages women to consider the negatives that come with bringing along baggage from past relationships. Hip hop producer/recording artist Kanye West brings attention to the mining and sales of conflict diamonds in the song “Diamonds from Sierra Leone.”

Tupac wanted the hip hop community to become knowledgeable and informed. He clearly understood the power of ideas and the ability of those ideas to have great influence over others. He earnestly understood that the ideas expressed in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, for example, could, despite the passing of time, have a lasting impact on the hip hop nation. He proved this to be true with the posthumous release of the film *Gridlock’d*, and the album *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*.

**DON KILLUMINATI: THE SUPPOSED MUSICAL CONCLUSION TO THE LIFE OF TUPAC SHAKUR**

Tupac’s assault on anti-intellectualism in hip hop stands as a lasting contribution to the culture. However, it would be his release of *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* that would further solidify his icon status. Produced by Tyrone “Hurt M Badd” Wrice and Darryl “Big D” Harper, the album was recorded in August 1996 at Los Angeles’s Can-Am Studios. Twenty songs
were initially recorded during the sessions; however, only twelve songs, such as the hip hop classics “Hail Mary,” “Toss It Up,” and “To Live and Die in L.A.” made the cut. Released November 5, 1996, the album went to number one on both the R&B and pop charts. It was later certified platinum five times. It would be the last album recorded by Tupac before his death, and demonstrated a marked improvement of his rhyme styles from early in his music career. His rhyme style, which had earlier incorporated an upbeat tempo on songs like Digital Underground’s “Same Song” and his own “If My Homies Call,” was now slowed down. The keyboards, synthesizers, and bells used in those early songs were replaced with stringed instruments to give Don Killuminati a darker and less pop sound. On “Hail Mary,” Tupac elongates syllables to draw out words like “me” and “see” at the end of each line of the chorus. His voice sounds slower and deeper, almost anticipating the sluggish, slurred speech that Houston’s DJ Screw would later popularize in his screwed and chopped mixtapes.

Tupac’s last album is controversial for several reasons. To begin with, it was made during the height of the East versus West Coast tension and during internal conflicts at Death Row. Second, the album was released as the first of several posthumous records. What made this even more controversial is the fact that it was this album that introduced Tupac as his alter ego, Makaveli, a truth that would serve as the catalyst for the “Tupac is alive” conspiracy theory. Finally, this album marked Tupac’s return to making social and political commentary.

While the Makaveli album did extremely well once it was released, it was recorded amid a great deal of strife and controversy between East Coast and West Coast rappers, as well as the strife and controversy at Death Row Records. The East-West conflict between Tupac and New York rapper and Bad Boy recording artist Christopher Wallace, better known by those in the hip hop community as Notorious B.I.G., had been boiling over for months. Each of these rappers took turns disrespecting the other on their albums and in person. Moreover, New York rappers, particularly Biggie Smalls, were still brooding over Shakur’s “Hit ’Em Up” anthem, which suggested that Tupac had sex with Biggie’s estranged wife, R&B artist Faith Evans. Tupac’s song had been in response to Biggie’s “Who Shot Ya,” a song Tupac interpreted as comments about him being shot, and the suggestion that Biggie was involved in the shooting. This growing feud gave Tupac, the Outlawz (Shakur’s friends and family members who debut on the Makaveli album), and music producers Wrice and Harper a sense of urgency about the making of Don Killuminati; it took only seven days to make. Some of those close to the making of the album, and some of his staunchest fans, believe that Tupac sensed that his life was going to be cut short; he worked feverishly with the understanding that in all likelihood, he was running out of time.

In addition to the East-West conflict, there were also internal rivalries at Death Row Records that were created as a result of artistic differences and
inflated egos. Dr. Dre, Death Row’s in-house producer, left the company in part because of differences with Tupac, including Tupac’s suggestion that Dre did nothing more than take credit for the hard work of others. In addition, Tupac was highly critical of Dr. Dre’s decision not to testify in court on behalf of Snoop Doggy Dogg in his murder trial.

Despite tension inside and outside of Death Row Records, Tupac became even more driven and determined to produce an album that would have a different sound and feel than his previously released *All Eyez on Me*. The recording sessions that took place in the Can-Am studios would, in the end, yield an album with far-reaching impact, especially after Tupac’s death.

**DON KILLUMINATI AS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL COMMENTARY**

Tupac’s *Don Killuminati* is a very dark, passionate, and intensely dramatic work that captures the rapper at his best. For Tupac, the album heralds a return to the social and political commentary that he became known for in previous recordings. In the song, “Bomb First (My Second Reply),” Tupac goes on the attack by dissing his East Coast rivals such as Nas, Jay-Z, Puffy, and Biggie Smalls. “Bomb First (My Second Reply)” is a song about a street soldier or “capo” (Tupac) maintaining respect in the face of his enemies by fighting them lyrically. Undoubtedly, Tupac’s street credibility was greatly enhanced in the eyes of fellow West Coast thugs for the barrage of comments that he directed toward his East Coast adversaries.

In the song, “White Man’z World,” Tupac also provides a sociological critique of black life behind prison bars. While writing to his mother and sister from prison, Tupac discusses the complexities of both prison life and street life, and he reflects on the challenges of being black in a world that doesn’t seem to care about the plight of the urban poor. Moreover, the song addresses such political issues as reparations, Black Nationalism, and class.

In “Life of an Outlaw,” Tupac and the Outlawz, Death Row’s up-and-coming rap group, provide strong social commentary on the daily struggles and hardships of an outlaw on the streets of urban America. The rappers paint a gritty picture of what it means to be a minority caught up in the web of street violence, retaliation, and nihilism. Moreover, the song demonstrates that the political nature of the outlaw is “ride or die.” This kill-or-be-killed mentality is revealed in the strategic and calculating choices the outlaw makes to survive in the urban killing fields or war zones of America.

In “To Live and Die in L.A.,” Tupac shows love and admiration for the “city of Angels.” While there are differences, the song is reminiscent of Tupac’s “California Love.” Socially, the song describes the people of Los Angeles and discusses their lived experiences in the city. Politically, the song makes reference to the LA rebellion of 1992 and Governor Pete Wilson’s conservative practices.
Yet the most popular (and socially significant) song on Don Killuminati is “Hail Mary.” In the song, Shakur, assuming the alias of Makaveli, paints a dark and gloomy picture of society’s thugs contemplating a nihilistic existence and shrouded in religious symbolism—the same religious imagery also present on the track “Blasphemy.” “Hail Mary” became an instant classic in hip hop culture. “Hail Mary” was one of Tupac’s favorites, and the song had a lasting effect on him. Tyrone “Hurt M Badd” Wrice recalls Tupac’s reaction to “Hail Mary”: “’Pac was loving every song. But when they played that song, he just went through a thing. . . . He threw his hands up in the air like he ruled a nation” (Matthews 112). Digital Underground still covers “Hail Mary” in concert as a tribute to their fallen friend.

The duress Tupac was facing inside and outside of Death Row Records served as a catalyst for the thought-provoking commentary on Don Killuminati. Tupac wanted listeners to think critically about the social and political conditions affecting black people and other people of color and their communities, and then work to change those conditions. Through “Hail Mary,” Tupac also reminds the hip hop nation that their conditions are capable of changing, but a belief in God and an active prayer life (i.e., “Hail Mary full of grace”) may be necessary in order to do so.

**TUPAC’S DON KILLUMINATI: THE BEGINNING OF LIFE AFTER DEATH**

One of the most significant contributions that Tupac’s Don Killuminati album makes to hip hop culture involves the development of Shakur’s alter ego, Makaveli, which in turn established the basis for theories that Tupac faked his death. The creation of the album, coincided with the development of a new identity for Tupac. Having read The Prince, Tupac saw utility in the thinking expressed by the fifteenth-century political strategist. Machiavelli was interested in using the thinking promulgated in The Prince to gain a political edge. In the rap game, Tupac understood that this same advantage could come by faking his own death or by outselling his competitors. In one of his last in-depth interviews, as an answer to questions about the album and why he chose to name himself after a fifteenth-century politician, Tupac stated, “It’s not like I idolize this one guy Machiavelli. I idolize that type of thinking where you do whatever’s gonna make you achieve your goal. I’m gonna change the rules in this rap game” (Marriott 125). Shakur was referring to the album All Eyez on Me in this interview, but the sentiment would evolve as he moved on to a new project. He used the philosophy espoused in The Prince to change the rap game through this album: It was hip hop’s first double CD, and also hip hop’s most expensive CD. Taking Tupac’s cue, artists such as Wu-Tang Clan would subsequently release double albums. In 2006, GM Grimm would take things further to release a triple album.
However, raising the bar by releasing a double album belied the deeper impact of the political philosopher Machiavelli on Tupac. Thus, while *All Eyez on Me* changed the rap game concerning album structure and record sales, *Don Killuminati*, more than anything else, perpetuated the belief that Tupac Shakur had either anticipated his own murder or was in fact not dead. The symbolism that fuels these conspiracy theories is most obvious in the album’s title and cover. In the cover art, the five holes in Tupac’s crucified body match the exact number of bullet wounds that killed him. Because of the album’s title, *Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory*, hip hop heads would come to believe that Tupac, after reading *The Prince*, wanted to gain a political edge in the rap game by faking his own death. Also of interest to fans was mysterious subtitle *The Seven Day Theory*; the number seven resounds in many statistics surrounding Tupac’s death. Tupac died seven days after he was shot. He was twenty-five, and two and five added together equal seven. Similarly, Tupac’s time of death was 4:03, which again adds up to seven. The theory that Tupac, having assumed his alter ego Makaveli, had faked his own death became widespread among hip hop listeners. Some speculated that the reason that his body was supposedly cremated was so that no one would be able to confirm his death by producing his body.

The rumors and various conspiracy theories that developed after Tupac’s death have helped catapult him into icon status. Moreover, rumors and conspiracy theories have the ability to alter our perceptions of reality, thereby becoming our reality, ultimately becoming the truths by which we live. The hip hop community needed to believe that Tupac, who existed as a solid representation of a generation of hip hop heads, was indeed alive. To accept any other truth was to suggest that a generation of believers was also dead: “If he is dead, then we [the generation] are, or could be, dead. Keeping him from dying, insisting on his bodily persistence in a secret location, forestalls that realization” (Dyson 252). Nevertheless, the real meaning of *Don Killuminati* lies in its ability to suggest that a generation of hip hop heads is in fact alive, well, and critically astute because one of their own, Tupac Shakur, is still with them. He may be nailed to the cross as the CD cover suggests, but like Jesus, he is resurrected for a generation to see and believe.

In addition to the Makaveli CD cover, Tupac has been resurrected in a variety of ways within contemporary black popular culture. Various posters, movies, books, and magazines bear the image of Tupac, further enhancing the suggestion that he is still alive, especially since many of these artifacts were issued after his death. The volume of posthumous release from Tupac inspired a sketch on Comedy Central’s *Chappelle’s Show* in which a DJ announces and plays a new Tupac song in a club. As Dave Chappelle dances, he begins to notice that Tupac’s lyrics are referring to events that occurred after his death, such as George W. Bush’s presidency and the release of the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. By the end of the song, Tupac is describing and predicting that night’s events in the club, as if he is watching the scene from
beyond the grave. Beyond music, there is also a Makaveli clothing line and a performing arts center founded by Afeni Shakur that is dedicated to keeping her son Tupac’s legacy alive. Further solidifying his icon status, a wax figure of Tupac was unveiled at Madame Tussauds wax museum in Las Vegas, Nevada, on April 5, 2006.

*Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* played a major role in shaping Shakur’s iconic status. The sociopolitical messages, the significance of Makaveli, and the foundation the album laid for the rumors that Tupac was alive contributed to the importance of the album in hip hop culture. In the context of the circumstances of Tupac’s death, the album’s lyrics and cover art seem to convey hidden messages through numerology. The message for hip hop heads seems clear: Tupac Shakur lives. The rumors are continually fueled by the reality that Tupac’s murder remains unsolved.

**THUG LIFE: SHAKUR’S IDEOLOGY**

Another major contribution to hip hop culture that further crystallized Tupac as an icon is his Thug Life ideology. Tupac suggested that Thug Life was “not an image, it’s just a way of life; it’s a mentality. Part of being a thug is to stand up for your responsibility and say this is what I do [hustle, challenge authority, and engage in illegal behavior] even though I know people are going to hate me” (Dyson 112–113). Moreover, according to Tupac, Thug Life was also an acronym that stood for “the hate you gave little infants fucks everyone.” The Thug Life ideology rests on several tenets: (1) thugs must ride or die; (2) thugs must be able to embrace death; and (3) thugs must embrace a nihilist attitude about life. These tenets were apparent in Tupac’s life and surfaced in his lyrics as well.

The Thug Life ideology revealed in Tupac’s lyrics and in his lifestyle paints a view of the world where characters such as the outlaw or ridah engage in illegal behavior, violence, and gang warfare in the killing fields of urban America. These urban warriors, many of them young black men, are often at war with their communities and with each other. The anthem that they carry into battle is ride or die, which essentially translates into retaliate, kill, or be killed. In songs such as “How Long Will They Mourn Me,” and “Death Around the Corner,” Tupac’s Outlaw persona faces revenge and retaliation against his enemies. Ultimately, the goal of an outlaw is survival at all costs, and not just survival, but survival with an added tinge of pride; this pride stems from triumphing over your enemy—or continuing to ride. Part of Tupac’s allure was found in the fact that he not only defeated death when he was shot five times in the studio, but he lived in spite of his apparent enemies, which led to a cockiness about life that somehow erased his fear of death. Even in death, Tupac is still riding as his legions of fans continue to support the theory that he is not dead.
Another important tenet of the Thug Life ideology suggested in the lyrics and lifestyle of Tupac Shakur is the unrelenting embrace of death. In Tupac’s worldview, the ridah or outlaw has no fear of death; at times, he welcomes it as a way of escaping the urban war zones. Tupac, like his outlaw persona, had a preoccupation with death that was reflected in such songs as “Lord Knowz,” “So Many Tears,” “No More Pain,” “Bury Me a G,” and “If I Die 2Nite” (Morrison 193). Tupac’s obsession with death was rooted in at least two factors that were prevalent in urban black America: suffering and nihilism. “The readiness to die is characteristic of the thug [ideology] as much because of the intensity of the suffering [Tupac] observed and endured [in the streets] as the belief that [he had] squared [himself] with God. Suffering—as misery and unhappiness, as pain and evil observed—was a constant theme in Tupac’s work” (Dyson 212). The Makaveli album exists as a testament to the fact that Tupac no longer had a fear of death; rather, he embraced it with the mindset that death was certain, and his death would probably come very soon.

In addition to death, nihilism was another tenet of Tupac’s Thug Life ideology. His preoccupation with death was rooted in nihilism. On the streets, an outlaw or ridah doesn’t care about his life or the life of others; his or her actions are the results of living and surviving in the American killing fields. Tupac often displayed a nihilistic attitude by throwing up his middle finger at the camera; he also had a tattoo across his upper back that said, “fuck the world,” which further illustrates his nihilistic mentality, as well as his disregard for the media and their (re)presentation of his life, his behavior, and his music. This truth underscores the fact that not only did Tupac use his music and poetry to teach and speak out, but his very body became a canvas through which he espoused his beliefs, however grim they may have been at times.

Tupac’s Thug Life ideology had a big impact on hip hop culture. To be thugged out, or even to be in compliance with the notion of being a thug, was quite popular within the culture. Rappers of various persuasions wore clothing and tattoos displaying “thug life.” Dress and style make a particularly important contribution to hip hop culture, and Tupac certainly influenced hip hop styles of dress during his lifetime. For him, Thug Life was a worldview not only to be embraced mentally but also worn physically. Tupac’s thug image was very popular in hip hop culture and in the media, but before engaging in an in-depth discussion, one first has to come to a realization of how this idea of the thug life is personified. Tupac wore common artifacts that, when worn together, constitute a typology of a thug. A typology is a symbol or representation of something else. Tupac’s thug typology is defined as a rigid nonverbal costume that represents thuggishness and the hard-core image of a gangsta rapper. Horn and Gurel suggest that a “clothing symbol stands for something beyond itself. Symbolism in dress is often unconscious, but a symbol used consciously can be more powerful” (310–311). Whether Tupac consciously tried to personify the thug typology or not, his style of dress and his influence cannot be ignored.
Not only did Tupac wear these common artifacts that construct his thug typology, but more important, his fans, homies, and other rappers also wore the clothing. These basic artifacts are: boots, jeans or fatigues, black leather jacket or vest, do-rag, and hooded sweater. Boots are a major artifact in the construction of the thug typology. Boots symbolize dominance and defiance. Those who wear boots don’t just step on their enemies; they crush and smash them while waging war. Denim jeans are also a part of the thug image. Tupac’s jeans symbolized toughness and durability. Rappers such as N.W.A., 50 Cent, and Bone Crusher have popularized the wearing of jeans and jean jackets in their videos. The strapped black vest, popularized by Tupac, also communicates thuggishness and durability, not only of the clothes, but, more important, of the wearer. The hooded jacket or sweater is a very important artifact in the thug typology because of the hood’s ability to conceal the identity of the owner. Tupac hooded up in the movie *Juice* and his homies were likewise concealed on the cover of his *2Pacalypse Now* album cover. The hood, which is the most distinctive aspect of the jacket, allows the owner to hide himself from interlopers; it is a cloaking device. Moreover, the hood, symbolically, represents an aura of mystery, intrigue, and in some cases death. Specifically in the case of Tupac, this aura of mystery, intrigue, and death could be seen as a prelude to what would come later with the advent of his alter ego, Makaveli.

The black leather jacket, which traditionally was associated with white Western culture, has found its way into Thug Life and hip hop culture. Traditionally, the black leather jacket has been a symbol of rebellion and badness. The black leather jacket reinforces the thuggishness of the wearer just as the do-rag, which Shakur was known for wearing, reinforces the image of toughness and what it means to be hard-core. The specific use of black clothing becomes important when one considers that color is important in creating meaning. The color black meant a great deal to Tupac and to Thug Life devotees. It has the power to create mood and can also reinforce other symbolic images. Tupac, in his thugged-out black outfits, symbolized danger, seriousness of purpose, and intrigue. Tupac’s thug typology was the perfect way to mask his sensitive and caring side from those who might try to do him harm because the color black has historically been associated with gloom, darkness, evil, and despair. Notably, Tupac managed to present the positive images associated with black, such as dominance, defiance, and sophistication.

At least two other artifacts that are not related to clothes further construct the thug typology for Tupac and those within hip hop culture that embrace his ideology: weed and the forty-ounce. These artifacts add a great deal of credibility to the wearer: “Befitting the outlaw character of the hard-core rapper, ingesting huge amounts of legal and illegal substances amounts to a ghetto pass and union card. Getting high is at once pleasurable and political: It heightens the joys to be found in thug life while blowing smoke rings around the constraints of the state” (Dyson 239).
Tupac's thug typology contributed greatly to hip hop culture. Not only could hip hop heads embrace Thug Life from an ideological standpoint, they could and did embrace it from the standpoint of fashion. Choosing an artifact, its color, and how to wear it is also a political act. Today, rappers such as 50 Cent have constructed their public image by immersing themselves in Thug Life ideology and presenting themselves as the model of what it really means to be hard or to be a thug. 50 Cent has even been criticized for trying to mimic Tupac in attitude, dress, lyrics, and lifestyle. He is just one example of the influence of Tupac’s Thug Life ideology, but it can be seen in the images of other rappers such as Ja Rule, Lil Wayne, and Young Jeezy. Clearly, the ideology influenced more than just the minds and hearts of hip hop heads; it also influenced the way they dress and their overall style.

THE LEGACY OF TUPAC SHAKUR: EXISTENCE AS A CONTRADICTION

Tupac’s life was filled with contradictions; he was a multifaceted individual to say the least. On the one hand, he embraced a revolutionary ethos inherited from his mother and uncle. Tupac had a strong desire to motivate change in the lives of his fans and in the community in which he lived. On the other hand, he truly embraced the whole Thug Life concept as an ideology, rather than as just a passing fad or phase. Tupac Shakur was a walking, breathing symbol of young black manhood existing in a contradictory state. In many ways, it was this contradictory state of existence that contributed to Tupac’s iconic status.

In an examination of the competing realities of the life of Tupac Shakur, one finds that his complex existence was based in contradiction and carried over to his art forms. In songs such as “Unconditional Love,” “Dear Mama,” and “Keep Ya Head Up,” Tupac’s heart toward women becomes clear in his celebration of positive attributes and images of women. Still, it is impossible to deny that more often than not, Tupac wrote lyrics that were misogynistic and degrading to black women. Songs such as “I Get Around,” “How Do U Want It,” and “Toss It Up,” as their titles suggest, present women as sex objects who exist mainly for the pleasure of men. He caught a lot of flack from the likes of C. Delores Tucker and others for such unwarranted sentiments. This again contrasts with much of his poetry, which provided significant insight into the more sensitive side of Tupac. The notion of contradiction, or more specifically double-consciousness, is reflected strongly in Tupac’s lyrics, his poetry, and the tattoos on his body. While the notion of the contradiction existed before Tupac Shakur, the hip hop community, scholars of popular culture, and everyday lay people have become intrigued with the contradictions expressed in varied ways throughout Tupac’s life. This has become especially true of scholars in the academy. Yes, it is a fair assumption
that many people were initially interested only in analyzing his poetry, but in any thorough analysis, one must understand the context in order to take a true assessment of a person’s work. Upon inspection of Tupac’s childhood, his relationships, his education, and his artistic creations (i.e., music, poetry, and movies), one begins to see how Tupac’s thinking and experiences influenced everything that he did.

When one takes into consideration the sum of his existence, Tupac Amaru Shakur emerges as hip hop’s greatest iconic symbol. From the beginning, the hip hop community was intrigued by him. Tupac’s love for reading, learning, and knowledge, as well as his commitment to destroying the notion that hip hop culture embraces anti-intellectualism is probably his greatest contribution to the culture. The creation of Don Killuminati as a concept album and ideology will forever haunt hip hop as members of the culture continue to search for Tupac’s whereabouts. Moreover, the Thug Life ideology, style of dress, and so on will continue to perplex hip hop heads as they struggle to understand their own dualities embodied in their notion of self. Tupac’s contributions did not provide all the answers facing rap music and hip hop culture; however, he did, through his lasting contributions, give hip hop culture enough questions to ask about a lifestyle that many have felt, and others continue to feel, so passionately about.

Surely, Tupac is representative of the common, impoverished, broken folk; he is a thug in every since of the word. Somehow though, he had an uncanny knack for communicating across race lines, social structure, and socioeconomic status. Very few can walk among thugs, yet be capable of building on the philosophy of political thinkers, and greater still, use these ideas to change hip hop forever. Tupac Shakur did just that. He made it acceptable to study hip hop as an art form. He brought hip hop to the forefront among the educational elite that represent academia. He made it possible that some individuals might look past the foul language and sexist remarks to truly understand the message behind a song or a poem. Tupac managed to make a huge impression in the twenty-five years of his life. More poignant is the realization that in the years since his death, people are still paying homage to his life, his music, his thoughtful insight into a world unknown to many and yet all too familiar to others.

See also: Notorious B.I.G., Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, Nas, Eminem

WORKS CITED

FURTHER RESOURCES


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Albums Released Posthumously

The Notorious B.I.G., also known as Biggie Smalls, was born Christopher George Latore Wallace on May 21, 1972. His mother, Voletta Wallace, was intermittently estranged from his father, Selwyn Latore, who was at least twenty years her senior. Voletta immigrated to the United States from the West Indian island of Jamaica. Selwyn was also from Jamaica, but migrated to the United States after living in London, where he kept his primary family during his courtship of Voletta Wallace and through Biggie’s formative years.
Voletta Wallace was Christopher Wallace’s primary caregiver and certainly the person who knew Biggie the best and the longest. Voletta’s childhood in Jamaica consisted of humble beginnings informed by a powerful familial and communal set of ethics with deep, abiding aspirations to and appreciation for education and religious piety. As a little girl she dreamed of America through the imagery in travel brochures and *Ebony Magazine*. Once her opportunity to come to America presented itself, she quickly took advantage. When she arrived in the United States at age seventeen, the streets of New York City were a radical departure from the America she had envisioned from her home in Jamaica. “I was disappointed but still hopeful. I knew there had to be more in this big country. I just needed time, money and a plan” (Wallace and Mackenzie 19).

Voletta Wallace got herself a plan in 1969 when she came to America. It involved an indefatigable work ethic and an uncompromising commitment to economic independence. This plan did not include her relationship with Selwyn Latore. By 1971 she had decided to stay in the United States no matter what happened. In her first job, she assisted a psychiatrist for just eighteen dollars a day. She met Selwyn after being coaxed into attending a friend’s party. She was immediately drawn to him because he showed flashes of the father figure she had missed from her upbringing in Trelawny, Jamaica. Selwyn whisked Voletta off her feet, wined and dined her; he showed her New York City in ways she had not previously experienced, and eventually Christopher Wallace was conceived.

After Wallace’s birth, Voletta committed herself to the upbringing of her son. Selwyn was already married and ambiguous about his newborn son. He was essentially out of the familial picture during Wallace’s toddler years. Voletta committed herself to contributing the energy and resources of at least two parents in order to raise her son. It wasn’t long before her nurturing had a direct impact on the young Christopher Wallace. Voletta admits that her son earned the name Biggie even as a young boy because he was well fed in her household. “If I had it to do over again, that’s one area where I would have done things differently. I would not have fed him so well. But during that time, the mindset was that the bigger the child, the healthier and happier he or she is” (Wallace and Mackenzie 51).

Biggie’s mom also stressed education in their home, a two-bedroom apartment on Brooklyn’s St. James Place between Fulton and Washington streets. If there was an undying conflict between them, the value and importance of traditional education would be the battleground. Because Voletta grew up in Jamaica where education was private and strict with physical disciplinary consequences, she attached great value to the public educational opportunities in the United States. When Biggie was just a toddler, Voletta also embarked upon her career as an early childhood educator, thereby underscoring her childhood experiences with education. Biggie, on the other hand, grew up in Brooklyn and although he did attend private school early on he
eventually demanded to be in public school for social (and safety) reasons. It was not long thereafter that this conflict between mother and son over Christopher’s commitment to his own education began to erupt. When Voletta was informed of Biggie’s truancy and blatant disrespect of the educational process, she quickly challenged him. This confrontation played itself out repeatedly, especially during Biggie’s high school years. From Biggie’s perspective, he could make more as a garbage collector than as an educator. Thus his mom’s insistence essentially fell on deaf ears. But this was only part of the reasoning behind Big Poppa’s aversion to traditional education. According to his mother, Biggie was always an inquisitive and intellectually gifted child. But by the mid to late 1980s, Biggie’s teenage years, Brooklyn was caught up in the crack cocaine epidemic that plagued much of urban America at that time. Substance abuse was not the challenge faced by Biggie or his mom, but the economic allure of the drug game was the centerpiece of the street life within which Biggie Smalls, the legendary freestyling MC, was to hone his skills and live the experiences about which he would spend his short career rhyming earnestly.

BEFORE HE WAS BIGGIE: THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Before Biggie became Biggie Smalls, he chose the name Cwest as his first MC moniker (see sidebar: Big Time MCs). He and his DJs, the Techniques, would meet after school and work on their craft. They would also meet with jazz

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Big-Time MCs
James Peterson

At close to 400 pounds, Christopher Wallace called himself Biggie Smalls, an extraordinary oxymoron. Wallace’s physical stature and his sensible marriage of that stature with his artistic designations (Biggie Smalls and eventually Notorious B.I.G.) follow a powerful and entertaining legacy of larger-than-life MCs who made similar decisions. As far back as the Fat Boys (circa 1985), oversized MCs have used their weight as a gimmick or for artistic capital. The Fat Boys made hit records and hip hop history by starring in the campy film Disorderlies. Heavy D hit it big with a single whose refrain reminded fans that “the overweight lover’s in the house.” Heavy D has since shed some pounds and parlayed his career as an MC into acting and producing.

Fat Joe, representing the Bronx like no other MC since KRS-One, has quietly become one of the most stable, long-lasting, and successful MCs in hip hop history. Fat Joe (aka Joey Crack/Don Cartagena) paired himself with an enormous and enormously talented MC by the name of Big Punisher, who passed away from complications having to do with his weight. Before his death, Big Pun sought medical treatment in an effort to shed some of the extra
saxophonist Donald Harrison, who encouraged all three of the boys to think beyond the postindustrial confines of their neighborhood. He allowed them to hone their craft on his equipment and he traded tidbits of knowledge about jazz in return for the same in rap and hip hop.

Biggie went to Westinghouse High School in Brooklyn, New York. Both Jay-Z and Busta Rhymes attended the same school. He dropped out of school at age seventeen, much to the chagrin of his mother, who is on record as stating that she and her son were not destitute or even poor by inner-city standards. Thus Biggie’s affinity for street life and hustling did not derive from economic lack in his own home. Essentially, Biggie lived a double life as a teenager. In the home he was his mother’s child, essential to her existence, polite, loving, respectful, and dearer to her than any other human being in her life. In the privacy of his room, or, better still, in the streets, on the corners, or in the basement studios of aspiring producers, he was Biggie Smalls, dreaming of becoming a rapper just like those superstars he was avidly reading about in *Word-Up Magazine*. LL Cool J, Run-DMC, and especially Big Daddy Kane were all powerful career and artistic influences on Biggie Smalls. But these dreams did not have the promise of the quick money crack trade, especially once Biggie realized that he could make even more money even faster if he trafficked his Brooklyn products in the South. It was in North Carolina that Biggie actually settled on the MC moniker Biggie Smalls. He came to this conclusion with one of his hustling partners, while they were hustling and watching Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby’s *Let’s Do It Again*. Biggie Smalls was a gangster in the film and hence the appropriate fit. It is ironic and worth noting here that Biggie borrowed his name from a minor character in a hugely popular film from the 1970s. He eventually brought more popularity to this oxymoronic name than that character or even the film itself were able to achieve. Unfortunately, although he popularized the name Biggie Smalls, he did eventually have to forego it (due to legal complications) for the less-catchy Notorious B.I.G.

Biggie’s DJs, the Techniques, didn’t last long beyond the Harrison phase, but eventually a pair of DJs, DJ 50 Grand and DJ Mister Cee, worked together to create a demo tape for Biggie Smalls. 50 Grand was aware of Biggie’s potential from a basement session where Biggie ripped some freestyles over classic breakbeats, including the breakbeat sampled for Big Daddy Kane’s classic, “Ain’t No Half-Steppin’.” 50 Grand implored DJ Mister Cee (who was on tour with Kane) to listen to Biggie Smalls. 50 Grand knew that Biggie was...
destined to be big in the rap game. Mister Cee was skeptical at first, but once he heard the tape, he knew that a more professional demo would have to be created and he knew exactly who to give it to.

In the early 1990s, *The Source* magazine was considered a bible of hip hop culture. Its reputation for covering the culture and informing its broad readership was impeccable. At that time, a young man from Washington, DC, edited a now famous column titled “Unsigned Hype.” Matteo Capoluongo or Matty C had already introduced several rap stars to the world through this small column in hip hop’s most important journalistic venue. He felt so strongly about Biggie’s demo that he actually played it for a young up-and-coming A&R guy named Sean Combs (see sidebar: Sean Combs and Bad Boy Records). Sean “Puffy” Combs, now known as “Diddy,” needed no convincing when it came to Biggie’s artistic potential. Biggie was exactly what Combs was searching for. Combs created Bad Boy Records as a home for hard-core hip hop with mass marketing appeal, and Biggie fit the bill perfectly. Combs

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**Sean Combs and Bad Boy Records**

*James Peterson*

Sean Combs has changed monikers several times over the course of his extraordinary career as a promoter, A&R person, record executive, artist manager, recording artist, fashion designer, and music television star. But from Puffy to Puff Daddy to P-Diddy to Diddy, he has always been about an indefatigable work ethic and a natural penchant for success by all means necessary. After leaving Howard University without his degree, he returned to New York where he continued to promote parties and events. One such event at City College ended in disaster (nine people dead and dozens injured), when the venue was oversold and concertgoers became trapped and trampled as more fans tried to push their way inside the doors. But eventually Combs became Andre Harrell’s star intern at Uptown Records. As he moved up the ranks at Uptown Records, he became more and more instrumental in the careers of some of the hottest up-and-coming acts in the music business, including Mary J. Blige and Jodeci. The brain child known as Bad Boy was a collection of slogans and some T-shirts at that time but as Combs began to take more credit for Uptown’s success and aspire to running his own recording company, he was fired by his mentor and boss, Harrell, in the summer of 1993. Several tracks from *Ready to Die* had already been recorded. He was devastated by this, but his desire for success was (and still is) unmatched. He somehow brokered a meeting with Clive Davis, who promptly advanced him $1.5 million, total creative control, and distribution. Bad Boy was officially born. But the core executives—Combs, Harve Pierre, and Derric “D-Dot” Angelette (holdovers from the Howard University days)—had already been hard at work in Bad Boy’s original studio and office, located in Diddy’s mother’s house. The support from Clive Davis merely helped to catapult the
immediately put Biggie on the remix for Mary J. Blige’s hit single, “Real Love.” This song was essentially Biggie’s introduction to the world, although he had already appeared on a few lesser known singles and posse cuts (songs with multiple rappers on them). A rough and relatively unknown Biggie was a natural fit for the up-and-coming queen of hip hop soul. And even though “Real Love” aspired to be an upbeat love song, it ended up being a club banger, most certainly due to the sixteen-bar verse delivered by Biggie Smalls.

Technically speaking, Biggie’s solo debut is a track titled “Party and Bullshit” on the 1993 soundtrack to the film *Who’s the Man?*. Although this isn’t the first time we hear Big, it is the first time that a solo recording of his enjoys a major release. “Party and Bullshit” is obviously an early Biggie recording; notice his higher-pitched, faster-paced vocals. However, the content of these rhymes, which essentially chronicle a night out partying, walks that ever-troublesome line between having a good time, drinking, rapping to women (i.e., the party), and having to deal with the sometimes violent realities of inner-city living (i.e., the bullshit). Hence, Big’s narrator in “Party and Bullshit” is having a great night out but he also has “two .22s in his shoes” in case anyone is looking for trouble. There were two other collaborations that year. One was the “What’s the 411?” remix with Mary J. Blige and the other was one of the earliest dance hall–hip hop collaborative concoctions, “Dolly My Baby.” On “Dolly My Baby,” Biggie coined one of his most famous and most often sampled lines: “I love it when you call me Big Poppa.”

Even with this flurry of remixes, singles, and guest appearances, Biggie was still not satisfied with the pace of the cash flow from the music industry. He still didn’t have any advance monies on the recording deal that was supposed to come to fruition through Puffy and Andre Harrell at Uptown/Bad Boy. To make matters worse, Big’s ex-girlfriend, Jan, was pregnant with his first child. When he broke this news to his mother, Voletta Wallace reminded him that although he had been talking about this so-called record deal for weeks, no material evidence of such a deal existed. The pressures of impending fatherhood combined with the sluggish compensation schedule of the entertainment industry convinced Biggie that he better get his hustle back on in the streets for real. He returned to North Carolina because he was higher up on the hustler’s food chain in Raleigh than in Brooklyn, but also because in North Carolina he thought his activities would not be subject to Puffy’s or the label’s scrutiny. He was wrong. When the various deal points were finally sorted out, Puffy contacted Biggie in North Carolina and expressed his disappointment in where Big was and what he was doing at that time. His record deal was in New York City
waiting for him. This couldn’t have happened soon enough. Biggie left for New York on a Monday morning and that Monday evening his illicit establishment in North Carolina was raided. He, of course, took this as a sign.

Back in New York with his low-level record deal in hand ($125,000 advance and recording budget) Biggie went to work on his first major label release, *Ready to Die*. It was fitting that one of the first tracks that Big worked on was “Party and Bullshit,” produced by Easy Mo Bee. Easy Mo Bee was the last producer to work with Miles Davis and the first to work with Biggie Smalls on a solo record. Mo Bee is a touchstone for Biggie’s impending iconic status. Surely, Easy Mo Bee, through the cheerleading efforts of Mister Cee, 50 Grand, Matty C, and others, was preconditioned to Biggie Smalls’s greatness even before he was able to work directly with him.

There are, however, several lesser known contributing reasons to Biggie Smalls’s status as an icon within hip hop culture. Some of these factors and reasons were in place even before he began work on his first major recording with Bad Boy/Uptown. Big’s flow, voice, persona, and experiences—those things that constitute his artistic production—are at least partially a result of his upbringing and the various regions or neighborhoods with which he made himself familiar. First, he is from Brooklyn, New York, a borough with extraordinary cachet in the hip hop world. Even though hip hop started out in the Bronx, Brooklyn had, by the early 1990s, taken its place as the premier borough of New York when it came to hip hop culture. Some of this stems from the number of famous rap artists who hail from Brooklyn, but much of it also stems from Brooklyn’s international reputation as one of the toughest, most culturally diverse cities in the world—especially when it comes to violent crime, drug dealing, and other illegal activities. So Biggie is from Brooklyn, an icon from an iconic town. But more lurks beneath this surface.

Although Biggie was born in Brooklyn, his Jamaican heritage is of extraordinary significance to hip hop. First, certain language undertones in his milky flow remind us of a peculiar Jamaican-Brooklyn patois. But more importantly, Biggie shares this heritage in common with the founding father of hip hop culture, Clive Campbell, also known as the legendary DJ Kool Herc. Herc immigrated to the United States in 1967. He and his sister started throwing the first hip hop jams in the mid-seventies in the Bronx. This was the beginning of hip hop culture—Jamaican-born youth finding their voices and various outlets for artistic expression in postindustrial New York City. Although we never hear Biggie big-up Jamaica as his homeland (he was born in the United States, after all), it still must be acknowledged that his parental heritage and cultural domestic upbringing reflect that of the founding family of hip hop culture. This heritage informs his iconographic status almost invisibly, but the vocal influence is audible, especially early in his career (listen to the “Dolly My Baby” remix with Biggie, Puff, and Supercat, for example).

Once we combine his Jamaican parentage and Brooklyn upbringing with his hustling experiences in the South, then an accurate portrait of the artist as
black American hip hop icon emerges. Although Biggie never actually lived in North Carolina, hustling crack anywhere other than where you live is probably the closest one can get to hard-core ethnographic investigation. Biggie’s trips to North Carolina were most assuredly lucrative, but they must have also exposed him to southern black America, an extraordinarily representative group when one considers the folk experience so central to nearly all of hip hop culture’s artistic narratives and historical legacies.

So Jamaican American, Brooklyn-bred Christopher Wallace returned from Raleigh, North Carolina, to officially begin his recording career as Biggie Smalls. The preproduction sessions for Biggie’s first album literally took place in that very same bedroom in which he first envisioned himself as an MC. In his tiny bedroom in his mother’s apartment, Big would sometimes have all of his boys jam-packed in for inspiration and general grimy creative energy. “The ‘One Room Shack’ that Biggie would later refer to in the song ‘Juicy’ was Wallace’s bedroom—funky yellow walls, a bed, a chair, clothes and assorted junk all over the place, a TV with a VCR, and two big party-size speakers. It was in that room that Biggie Smalls, the rapper worked out his rhymes” (Coker 79). This room, along with his vast array of urban lived experiences, functioned as the incubator for Ready to Die, Biggie’s classic debut album.

Ready to Die was released in September 1994. In order to fully understand the impact and significance of this momentous debut, we must also understand the state of hip hop at that time. Two years earlier, Dr. Dre had released The Chronic. This multiplatinum G-funk-inspired West Coast gangsta rap record crystallized the dominance of West Coast artists on the international rap landscape. New York City, the birth place and mecca of hip hop culture, hadn’t produced a multiplatinum star in years. West Coast–style gangsta rap dominated the culture and industries of hip hop. “The final testament to the power of Biggie is the types of songs he made. He single-handedly shifted the musical dominance back to the East Coast. From 1991 to 1994, the West Coast style of rap was the dominant force in Hip-hop. Biggie, with the guidance of Puffy, used familiar melodic R&B loops, combined with his voice texture and rhyme skills, and caused a Hip-hop paradigm shift” (Kool Moe Dee 264). In many ways, the New York/East Coast audiences were given to believe that the center of the hip hop universe had shifted to Los Angeles. But “in just a few short years the Notorious B.I.G. went from Brooklyn street hustler to the savior of East Coast hip-hop” (Huey 359).

B.I.G. IN THE PLATINUM ERA

Ready to Die was East Coast rap’s saving grace for many reasons. The cinematic intro to the album promised a fresh and gritty portrait of the urban underground hustler-turned-rap artist. The intro track on Ready to Die
features snippets of four previously released songs with various voiceover skits corresponding with key moments in B.I.G.’s life. The first scene is B.I.G.’s birth, featuring an ironically proud pappa (who isn’t in B.I.G.’s life too much beyond his toddler years) coaxing B.I.G.’s mother to “push!” The soundtrack for this portion of the intro interpolates snippets from Curtis Mayfield’s classic “Super Fly,” released during the year of B.I.G.’s birth, 1972. The second scene begins with Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” the single that inaugurated hip hop culture in the mainstream music industry in 1979. The voiceover here is an argument started by B.I.G.’s father, who finds out that his son has been caught shoplifting. Of course he wonders profanely why neither he nor B.I.G.’s mom can control the youngster. Note here that according to Voletta Wallace, Christopher Wallace actually was a model child until his high school years, when the allure of the streets simply overwhelmed her domestic influences. This music snippet is important because it provides listeners with a sense of where B.I.G. was when “Rapper’s Delight” (and by extension modern popular rap music) exploded onto the American pop cultural landscape. The third and most powerful scene features B.I.G. in a heated conversation with an anonymous crime partner. B.I.G. challenges his partner in crime to “get this money” just as they are about to rob a New York City subway train. The musical snippet for this scene is the classic single by Audio Two, “Top Billin’,” released in 1987. As “Top Billin’” fades out and then back in, B.I.G.’s shouts, gunshots, and screams from his victim flesh out this scene. The final cinematic scene of the intro track features an exchange between B.I.G. and a prison CO. As B.I.G. is leaving prison, the CO claims that he will be back: “You niggas always are.” The musical snippet for this scene is taken from “Tha Shiznit” on Snoop Dogg’s debut album, Doggystyle, released in 1993. Even though this particular sample bears no credit to Snoop in the Ready to Die liner notes, listeners can actually hear Snoop rapping in the background of the final piece of B.I.G.’s cinematic introduction. Moreover, Snoop’s Doggystyle was an important model for Ready to Die because of its extraordinary success and its ability to straddle the hard-core gangsta rap tensions and a lighter sensibility with popular mainstream appeal. In many ways, Ready to Die mirrors Doggystyle even more than The Chronic. The remainder of Ready to Die realizes the power and complexity of this four-part introduction.

Several hit singles were released from the album: “Juicy,” “Big Poppa,” and “One More Chance.” Each of these tremendously successful singles employed similar formulas by Sean “Puffy/Diddy” Combs and the Bad Boy production team. “Juicy” interpolates Mtume’s “Juicy Fruit” to perfection with a rap narrative that chronicles a Horatio Alger–like rise from the grimy streets of Brooklyn to ghetto superstar status as a rapper. Many of the lyrics from this song have gone on to an unofficial lyrical hall of fame, but at least the following line warrants repeating here: “You never thought that hip hop would take it this far.” This line captures definitive aspects of B.I.G.’s lyrical
appeal; a simple rhyme scheme betrays the complexity of the content. While “Juicy” is about B.I.G.’s unlikely rise to popularity, he is also very much aware of the fact that hip hop culture and rap music had by the early nineties stunned its critics and nay-sayers en route to becoming the world’s most popular music. In many ways, B.I.G.’s career (big, black, ugly, and utterly lovable) mirrors that of hip hop in terms of early questions about viability and ultimately achieving rags-to-riches success. “Juicy” captures these themes perfectly. More than any other rapper, B.I.G. ushered in the platinum era of hip hop culture.

Hip hop’s development can appropriately be broken down into several eras: First, the old-school era. From 1979 to 1987, hip hop culture cultivated itself, usually remaining authentic to its countercultural roots in the postindustrial challenges manifested in the urban landscape of the late twentieth century. Artists associated with this era included Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the Sugarhill Gang, Lady B, Big Daddy Kane, Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow, and others.

Second, in the golden age, from 1987 to 1993, rap and rappers began to take center stage as the culture splashed onto the mainstream platform of American popular culture. The extraordinary musical production and lyrical content of rap songs artistically eclipsed most of the other primary elements of the culture (break dancing, graffiti art, and DJing). Eventually the recording industry contemplated rap music as a potential billion-dollar opportunity. Mass-media rap music and hip hop videos displaced the intimate, insulated urban development of the culture. Artists associated with this era included Run-DMC, Boogie Down Productions, Eric B. & Rakim, Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Public Enemy, N.W.A., and many others.

Third, in the “platinum present,” from 1994 to the present, hip hop culture has enjoyed the best and worst of what mass-media popularity and cultural commodification have to offer. The meteoric rise to popular fame of gangsta rap in the early nineties set the stage for a marked content shift in the lyrical discourse of rap music toward more and more violent depictions of inner-city realities. Millions of magazines and records were sold, but two of hip hop’s most promising artists, Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, were literally gunned down in the crossfire of a media-fueled battle between the so-called East and West Coast constituents of hip hop culture. With the blueprint of popular success for rappers laid bare, several exceptional artists stepped into the gap left in the wake of Biggie and Tupac. This influx of new talent included Nas, Jay-Z, Master P, DMX, Big Pun, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Eminem, and Outkast.

B.I.G.’s seminal role in some of the most significant and powerful transitions in hip hop culture developed through the release of the incredibly popular singles from Ready to Die. Thus, the inaugural single, “Juicy,” covers a dizzying array of transformations and transitions from B.I.G.’s life as a petty
thief and hustler to his new life as a player, rapper, and finally an extraordinary storyteller. “Notorious B.I.G. is the all time greatest hard-core Hip-hop storyteller ever. Slick Rick is the overall king of storytelling, but for the rated-R, violent type of story, Biggie is the man” (Kool Moe Dee 263). Ironically, the singles from Ready to Die do not exhibit B.I.G.’s most compelling hard-core narrative abilities. He shows some glimpses, but most of the released singles are about flossing, partying, and sexing women.

“Big Poppa” garnered even more industry success than “Juicy,” sampling the Isley Brothers’ “Between the Sheets” perfectly (and almost in its entirety). Very few rappers can, as new artists, create singles that sample their own voices in the hook or refrain. B.I.G.’s voice was distinct enough and had been featured on so many singles even before his major label debut that the classic line from “Party and Bullshit”—“I love it when you call me Big Poppa”—almost instantly solidified “Big Poppa” as a mainstay on radio playlists and in club DJ repertoires. The classic Isley Brothers riff combined with B.I.G.’s classic rap aimed at women make this particular single a timeless testament to Biggie’s power as an artist. “Another testament to Biggie’s power was he was anything but your prototypical ladies man, and yet he made songs geared towards women, and had a huge female following” (Kool Moe Dee 264).

“One More Chance” solidified B.I.G.’s appeal to his women listeners more than either of the two previously released singles from Ready to Die. “One More Chance” samples the Jackson Five's “I Want You Back.” The album version and the single version are almost completely different from each other in sound and content, at least with respect to profanity. “Released in the spring of ’95, the ‘One More Chance’ remixes represented the apex of Biggie-mania in New York City. While Bad Boy’s previous strategy with singles featured one side for the radio and one for the streets, ‘One More Chance’ covered all bases by including two somewhat different instrumentals to accompany Big’s vocal track of entirely new (and somewhat sanitized) lyrics” (Coker 310). In order to fully appreciate the impact and significance of the single version of “One More Chance,” the music video must be taken into account. “The video for the remix of ‘One More Chance’ was a star-studded ‘damn I wish I was there,’ old-school house party. From Kid Capri to Miami’s own Luke, everybody was in this one. Mary J. Blige, Queen Latifah, Da Brat, the reggae artist Patra ... Total sang the hook ‘Oh Biggie give me one more chance’” (McDaniels 335). The model, Tyson, Heavy D, R&B sensations Zhane and SWV, and of course Biggie’s wife, Faith, all make appearances. The video is a mid-1990s house party how-to manual in visual form. And the fact that so many well-known female artists were willing to make cameos (especially considering the lyrics of the original) was a powerful affirmation of Biggie’s irresistible sex appeal with women. The video also reifies for its viewers B.I.G.’s iconic status within the music industry itself. The people’s champ was also the executives’. His mass appeal had micro impressions as well; at this point in hip hop history the Notorious B.I.G. was being crowned

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king both within the music industry and among millions of fans across the nation.

Although most of B.I.G.’s audience might associate *Ready to Die* with its overplayed radio-friendly club-smashing singles, the remainder of the album explores the much darker, somewhat less marketable themes of homicide and suicidal mentalities in the crack-infested inner-city environment. Consider the title track, “Ready to Die.” It is almost as if certain songs like “Ready to Die,” “Suicidal Thoughts,” and “Everyday Struggles” are on a separate album from the singles “Juicy” and “Big Poppa.” But it is all Biggie Smalls. “Ready to Die” chronicles the nihilistic inclinations of a crook who is trapped at the crossroads of lack and desire. This “crossroads of lack and desire” is originally connected to hip hop culture via Tricia Rose in *Black Noise* (1994), but the concept itself is crystallized in Houston Baker’s *Blues Ideology and Afro American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1987). B.I.G.’s narrator obviously exists in a world where material wealth is ubiquitous; hence his undying desire. However, he lacks these resources and any legal means of obtaining them. The narrator on the album title track, “Ready to Die,” captures the predicament of hundreds of thousands of inner-city youth who are jobless and alienated from social institutions like schools and churches; yet they must navigate one of the wealthiest nations in the world with little or no resources. They are therefore ready to die for the material assets that tease and evade them in a prototypical late capitalist society.

“Suicidal Thoughts” plays like a stream-of-consciousness rap in which B.I.G. contemplates taking his own life. In his suicidal reverie, B.I.G. explains why he prefers hell over a heaven filled with “goodie goodies” hanging out in a paradise where God’s rules might be too strict. He does, in sincere tones, ask for forgiveness from his mother for being an evil son. But there is otherwise very little remorse in “Suicidal Thoughts.” To B.I.G., death’s call is comparable to the alluring call of crack cocaine for crackhead characters like Pookie from *New Jack City*—maybe the most famous cinematic crackhead for the hip hop generation. At one point in *New Jack City*, Pookie, played by a young, skinny Chris Rock, pleads with a dealer offering to trade sexual favors for a five-dollar vial of crack cocaine. Taking into account the manner in which B.I.G. dies, this analogy between crack/crack addicts and B.I.G. and death takes on an extraordinarily realistic tenor imbued with a sad seriousness of which most listeners in 1994 were hardly aware (see sidebar: Hip Hop’s Culture of Death).

In “Everyday Struggles,” Biggie’s narrator exclaims that he doesn’t want to live anymore. He hears death knocking at his front door. This song is the portrait of the low-level crack dealer, hustling to barely sustain himself on the violent streets of Brooklyn. Initially this narrator is barely surviving. He can’t enhance his hustle through consignment with his supplier, and in general the community hates him. He contemplates taking his hustle out of state and finally starts to make some progress in the drug economy. The final verse
Hip hop figures seemingly have a fascination with death. Artists boast about being shot or taking someone out. Bulletproof vests adorn the bodies of rappers in music videos, gunshots can be heard resounding on the tracks of CDs, and self-made prophecies of death are put to the rhythm of a beat and made to rhyme. Songs such as “Six Feet Deep,” by the Geto Boys, “Gangsta Lean” by Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, “If I Die 2Nite,” by Tupac, and “Goodbye to My Homies,” by Master P featuring Silk the Shocker, Sons of Funk, and Mo B. Dick are dirges to the fallen soldiers in the killing fields of urban America. When gansta rap hit the mainstream, artists such as N.W.A. spoke of the atrocities that were commonplace in the hood. They gave many people a dose of reality. However, what was at first a verbal release of pain and anguish later became a trend.

For many artists in the gangsta rap era, in order to get signed, it became almost a necessity to have street credibility and a hard-core reputation. This included having bullet wounds, carrying guns, and wearing bulletproof vests. Rhyming about death and murder became fashionable, and the violence spilled out of the lyrics and into the streets, with the murders of Tupac, Biggie, Big L, Freaky Tah, and Fat Pat, and the attempted murders of 50 Cent and the Game.

While 1990s gangsta rap certainly elevated the level of attention to murder and gun violence in lyrics, old-school hip hop also had its run-ins with death. DJ Scott LaRoc of Boogie Down Productions was stabbed to death in an altercation, and Slick Rick was sentenced to prison for attempted murder in a drive-by shooting. Yet even with this history, to say that rap lyrics influence or cause violence is to ignore the statistics that tell us that physical violence and murder occur at alarming rates in impoverished neighborhoods, particularly among young African American men. Rappers who capitalize on real-life ghetto violence, however, may find themselves, even as major-label recording artists, not that far removed from the perils of street life. In the film documentary, *The MC: Why We Do It*, several MCs, including Rakim and Raekwon the Chef, speak of the dangers of promoting violence and death in lyrics; people may hear these rhymes and test their veracity by turning their guns on an MC on the street. For some artists, this lyrical theme of death serves as a way of selling more records. Many opponents, however, point out that a lot of the artists that talk about death and violence really don’t live the life they rap about in their songs. However, in the case of Tupac Shakur and fellow rapper Notorious B.I.G., they certainly lived the lives they talked about in their songs. The question becomes whether their rap personas were true to their persons, or if offstage they grew into the personas they created in their music. The legends of Tupac surviving five bullets and 50 Cent surviving nine shots, including one to the face, make these rappers seem invincible on their
of the song finds his crew surviving the perils of this violent underground economy even as he suggests that black criminals face limitations that white criminals (like John Gotti) do not. In the end though, even after some modicum of success, the refrain completes the song, and the struggle to live even with the desire to die for material wealth ultimately amounts to not living at all.

READY TO DIE: BIGGIE'S MUSIC AND HIS SHORT LIFE IN THE LIMELIGHT

Most of the tracks on B.I.G.’s debut album flip back and forth between two opposite themes. One theme is the celebration of success in the music industry. Partying, running through numerous anonymous women, and flashing (or flossing) newly acquired monetary resources dominate the content of these songs. On the opposite side of the spectrum, other songs are much more thematically aligned with album title. These rhymes reflect a pursuit of material sustenance and wealth that transcends relentlessness. These songs “express the futility of ghetto life in terms explicit and real enough to speak to the streets, but human enough to avoid myopia” (Mao 309). In each of these darker tracks, B.I.G.’s narrator is literally ready to die for material gain, but this preparedness is not glorified. It is not sexy or appealing. In fact, B.I.G. makes it clear that being ready to die for material things is, in many real-life cases, the equivalent of already being dead.

Ready to Die went on to sell millions of records. It was certified quadruple platinum on October 19, 1999. Along with several other debut albums from New York City artists (Nas’s Illmatic, Wu-Tang’s Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers), and Black Moon’s Enta da Stage), Ready to Die recaptured the flag for East Coast hip hop. But most, if not all, of these artists avoided the ultraviolent pitfalls of overexposure that surely contributed to B.I.G.’s early and unfortunate death. “We nodded our heads in affirmation and then when

Further Resources
Biggie named his first album *Ready to Die* we all acted surprised when it happened. Word is bond, son. Plain and simple” (Williams 171).

Many artists with B.I.G.’s level of popularity would be criticized for taking nearly three years to release a sophomore album, but B.I.G. was extraordinarily busy between *Ready to Die* and the first of three posthumous releases, *Life After Death*. On the heels of the “One More Chance” remixes, B.I.G.’s Brooklyn protégées, Junior M.A.F.I.A. (featuring Lil’ Cease and Lil’ Kim), released *Conspiracy* on Undeas/Big Beat Records. Two powerhouse singles, “Player’s Anthem” and “Get Money,” “provide the prototypical soundtrack for ghetto fabulous aspirations; you can almost hear the Cristal bottles popping within their incessantly hooky productions” (Mao 314). *Conspiracy* has yet to be certified platinum, but the timing of the release of these two popular singles almost immediately following the last releases from *Ready to Die* further reinforced B.I.G. as the icon of hip hop culture. He also clearly targeted the heart of mainstream success in the music industry with as much relentless desire as those grimy narrators on the darkest *Ready to Die* tracks.

B.I.G. also had several minor single releases during that time. Some of these releases were live recordings (at the Palladium in New York and in Philadelphia) and or soundtrack singles (Def Jam’s soundtrack for the concert film *The Show*). In 1995, DJ Mister Cee released the *Best of Biggie* mixtape. “Lovingly compiled (in near chronological order no less) with little intrusive or extraneous cutting by the man who gave Big his first significant break in the music business, it is an essential document of the first half of Biggie’s career” (Mao 315). Again, this constant release of performances and singles provided audiences with a sense that B.I.G.’s artistry was boundless and that no matter how much we heard from him we still wanted to hear more. In 1996, B.I.G. collaborated with Jay-Z on “Brooklyn’s Finest,” a classic collaboration with his Brooklyn partner in rhyme. But probably the most important project that B.I.G. worked on (other than his own) was Lil’ Kim’s debut album, *Hard Core*.

There were a lot of women in B.I.G.’s short and extraordinary life. But very few of these women had a significant impact. His mother, Voletta, was, of course, a dominant force. She raised him and shaped his powerful personality in ways that only those engaged in strong mother-son relationships might appreciate. The mother of his first child, daughter T’yanna, was probably Big’s first young love (Florence “Jan” Tucker). His only wife, Faith, was a whirlwind of love, drama, and mother of Big’s only son, Christopher Wallace Jr. Yet among these powerful women who mothered children for him, Lil’ Kim clearly had a special place in B.I.G.’s heart. Artistically she continues to take her cues from him (nearly ten years after his passing), but while he was alive they were able to pour all of their illicit affection for each other into one of the most powerful and sexually explicit albums ever released in hip hop (by either a male or female solo artist), Lil’ Kim’s *Hard Core*. Purely out of respect for the Wallace family, Kim Jones, and Faith and her new family,
we should not make too much out of the love triangle: B.I.G., Faith, and Lil’ Kim. But clearly they were all forced to wrestle with Big and Kim’s indiscretions in some occasionally very public ways. In the music video for Junior M.A.F.I.A.’s “Get Money,” B.I.G. and rap artist-model Charli Baltimore (another reported love interest of B.I.G.) act out a violent domestic disagreement between B.I.G. and a platinum blonde Charli Baltimore. Since Big was married to Faith and she at that time sported various platinum blonde hairstyles, the audience was invited to make the most obvious connections.

At the height of the East Coast–West Coast conflict, Faith made a record with Tupac Shakur and took a photo with him in the recording studio. This was all Tupac needed to start a vicious rumor that he had slept with Biggie’s wife. Although Faith has categorically denied ever having intimate relations with Tupac, the public hashing out of these matters (between B.I.G. and Tupac, Kim and Faith, Faith and B.I.G., etc.) created one of the most volatile and potentially violent moments in hip hop and the music business in general. To B.I.G.’s credit, aside from the one-line jab at Faith on “Brooklyn’s Finest” (“If Faith have twins she probably have two Pacs”) and the video escapade with Charli Baltimore, he rarely responded to Tupac’s incitement or any of his relentless dis records. He never responded negatively. Big clearly understood that because of his stature in the industry, any beef between him and Tupac could be blown completely out of proportion. He was, unfortunately, absolutely right.

On September 13, 1996, Tupac Shakur died in Las Vegas from multiple gunshot wounds incurred immediately following a Mike Tyson fight earlier that week. When B.I.G.’s biographer, Cheo Hodari Coker, asked him where he was when he heard the news of Tupac’s death, B.I.G. responded: “I got home and it was on the news, and I couldn’t believe it. I knew so many niggaz like him, so many ruff, tuff motherfuckers getting shot. I said he’ll be out in the morning, smoking some weed, drinking some Hennessy, just hanging out” (Coker 167). In other interviews, B.I.G. was similarly shaken by Tupac’s passing. It must have been even more unnerving that he had to finish his much-anticipated second album and promote this album amid rumors that he or his label, Bad Boy Records, had something to do with Tupac’s unsolved murder. “You be thinking that when a nigga is making so much money that his lifestyle will protect him; that a drive-by shooting ain’t supposed to happen. He was supposed to have flocks of security; not even supposed to be sitting by no window” (167).

By the time the fateful 1997 Soul Train Awards were approaching in early March, B.I.G. had spent over a month in Los Angeles finishing his album, shooting the video for the first single, “Hypnotize,” and promoting his upcoming release. On Saturday, March 8, B.I.G. should have been in London, England, promoting Life After Death. Instead he decided to cancel the promo tour. He was having a good time in Los Angeles and he wanted a break from his rigorous recording schedule. His sense about all of the tensions surrounding
Tupac’s unsolved murder, his rumored involvement, and his impending prominence across the hip hop landscape was extraordinarily positive. He felt as if he would make all of the haters love him. He knew that he had crafted an album that could appeal to a mass audience as well as various niches and regional pockets of the hip hop world. He was excited about how West Coast listeners would respond to “Goin’ Back to Cali,” B.I.G.’s ode to the west side. He had also achieved a newfound peace with God. He commemorated this peace with a tattoo on his inside right forearm. The tattoo took verses from Psalm 23 (e.g., “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?”).

On the night of March 8, just hours before B.I.G. was murdered, he and his entourage attended what was by most accounts the party of the century. *Vibe* magazine and Qwest Records sponsored an official Soul Train Awards after-party at the Petersen Automotive Museum. Since there were so many industry folk in town, as well as most of the key people from Bad Boy records, this after-party was essentially an unofficial release/listening party for *Life After Death*. The single, “Hypnotize,” had already been released and the Bad Boy promotion machine was gearing up for its biggest project ever. As spectacular as this party was, it makes sense that it had to be shut down at 12:35 a.m. for being overcrowded. It was almost too good. As B.I.G. and the caravan carting his entourage exited the party, a car pulled alongside B.I.G.’s rented Suburban and seven forty-caliber nine-millimeter shots rang out (for a full, detailed account of this gruesome scene and the eerie events leading up to Biggie’s murder, consult the film *Tupac and Biggie* or Cheo Hodari Coker’s in-depth biography, *Unbelievable*). After the shooting, B.I.G. was rushed to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, but he never regained consciousness. At 1:15 a.m. on March 9, 1997, Christopher George Latore Wallace was dead at the age of twenty-four.

**BIGGIE’S IMPACT AND LEGACY**

Christopher Wallace’s funeral was equivalent to his stature in hip hop culture. As a beloved son of Brooklyn, he was afforded a funeral procession through the streets of his neighborhood. This procession was attended by tens of thousands of people who were emotionally charged and distraught with shock at the murder of Biggie Smalls. The fact that it was a drive-by shooting and that the shooting took place in Los Angeles, so far from home for his homegrown Brooklyn audience, enhanced the tension in the atmosphere even further. As the procession came to an end, the mournful silence in the streets was interrupted by the blaring sounds of Biggie’s new single, “Hypnotize.” Journalists and various people who were present claim that the crowd erupted in joy and pain. Unfortunately, there were several clashes with police and at least ten people were ultimately arrested, a sad ending to hip hop culture’s most poignant memorial service. But for Biggie there was literally life after death.
In many ways, the posthumous album *Life After Death* picks up exactly where *Ready to Die* left B.I.G.’s growing audience. But instead of B.I.G. dying in a suicidal rut, he recovers from a violent trauma to grace us with two albums’ worth of the most powerful and appealing rap music produced to date. Considering the fact that the album was released just weeks after B.I.G.’s murder, the introductory track is just as eerie as the album’s title. B.I.G. has indeed experienced an extraordinary life through his musical career even after his brutal assassination. *Life After Death* features tracks that are specific to various subcommunities within hip hop culture. In order to fully appreciate B.I.G.’s fluidity in almost every vernacular rap style developed in the United States, you must actually listen to the album with a good sense of the developments in hip hop culture and rap music since 1997.

The “B.I.G. Interlude” is modeled directly after Schoolly D’s classic gangsta rap song “PSK (Park Side Killers),” which is as much an ode to Philadelphia as “Going Back to Cali” is to California. On “Notorious Thugs,” B.I.G. assumes the popular staccato style of the (at the time) most famous rap act to hail from the Midwest: Cleveland, Ohio’s Bone Thugs-N-Harmony. Collaborations with R. Kelly, the Lox, Mase, 112, and Puffy’s near-ubiquitous presence were, amazingly, not overdone. And B.I.G. did not disappoint his base audience. “Kick in the Door” and “Ten Crack Commandments” are pure DJ Premier-produced street bangers, while “Hypnotize” and “Mo Money, Mo Problems” blazed the radios and clubs for months. “Never has an artist attempted to please so many different audiences simultaneously and done it so brilliantly…. *Life After Death* was nothing short of a gangsta rap *Songs in the Key of Life*, the stylistically diverse Stevie Wonder double album that made listeners wonder if there was anything Stevie couldn’t do” (Coker 262–263). Narrative structure and detail abound on “I Got a Story to Tell,” “Niggas Bleed,” and “Somebody’s Got to Die.” Songs like these make *Life After Death*, and Biggie’s lyrical prowess in general, unparalleled in hip hop even now, ten years after his death. *The Source* magazine gave *Life After Death* a five-mic rating. The mic rating system is a long-standing barometer for hip hop albums. Although, unfortunately, this ratings system, along with *The Source* itself, has been called into question, very few fans challenged the five-mic rating on B.I.G.’s second album. Even those purists who did not like the fact that Brooklyn’s native son was as close as any rapper had ever been to authentic universality had to at least appreciate such an exceptionally skilled effort on record.

Notorious B.I.G.’s second posthumous album, *Born Again*, was released in December 1999, almost three years after his murder. Unlike *Life After Death*, *Born Again* relied on previously recorded material, numerous guest appearances, and some production wizardry from Sean “Puffy/Diddy” Combs to make it whole. Guest appearances include Snoop Dogg, Eminem, Nas, Lil’ Kim, Busta Rhymes, Redman, Method Man, Ice Cube, and Missy Elliott. Very few, if any, of these tracks stand out or grab the ears of listeners in
the same manner as B.I.G.’s earlier work. “Dead Wrong,” featuring Eminem, conjures nostalgia for the early preconflict days; here producers sport a classic verse from early in B.I.G.’s career, evidenced by the higher pitch in his delivery. Finally, though, Born Again was (and is) completely incapable of satisfying audiences’ desire to hear more of their fallen hip hop icon. The album itself was super-saturated with guest appearances and, in light of the amount and variety of posthumous material being released on Tupac Shakur (a comparison impossible to avoid, considering the ways in which these two were connected in life as friends, enemies, and murder victims), Born Again cannot shine as a viable album in Biggie’s repertoire.

On what should be the last full-length album headlined by the Notorious B.I.G., Duets: The Final Chapter, executive producers Sean “Diddy” Combs and others were able to somehow come up with a formula that is remarkably similar to the template for Born Again, but with more effective results. They combine verses from Biggie with mostly contemporary rappers (except for Tupac and Big Pun) over contemporary hip hop production. Either we as an audience of B.I.G. miss him more than ever or these are just better songs, stronger musical productions, and more authentic collaborations. One of the album’s standouts is the track “Living in Pain” featuring Mary J. Blige, Nas, and Tupac. By any standards, this is a legendary all-star lineup of artists. This may be the best work that Mary J. Blige has provided for a Biggie Smalls track since his much earlier work on “Real Love.” Blige’s vocals perfectly capture the pain and mourning that we feel hearing these kinds of posthumously produced recordings even as she soulfully captures the pain and nihilism of violent inner-city living that has claimed the lives of two of the three MCs on this particular recording. “Living in Pain” stands out among hip hop culture’s posthumously produced materials. Three of the greatest MCs of all time—Biggie, Pac, and Nas—contribute classic verses over a modulating operatic track produced by Just Blaze. It is a shame that these three were unable to collaborate when they were all alive, but Nas clearly understands the pain of the lost opportunity and the burden he bears to promote the legacies of both B.I.G. and Tupac even as he lives and continues to create more music in their shadows. Other tracks, especially “Hustler’s Story” featuring Akon and the legendary Scarface, “Wake Up Now” featuring Korn, and even “Ultimate Rush” featuring Missy Elliott all help to lift this album well beyond the results of Born Again.

Ten years after B.I.G.’s murder, the case still remains unsolved. The story and the controversy surrounding the unsolved murders of both B.I.G. and Tupac continue to make headlines. In September 2002, a Los Angeles Times business reporter, Chuck Phillips, wrote a story that directly implicated B.I.G. in Tupac’s murder. “The Times reported that on the night of Shakur’s killing a Crips ‘emissary’ had visited B.I.G. in the penthouse suite at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas, where the enormous rapper promised $1 million on the condition that Shakur was killed with his gun” (Sullivan, “Unsolved Mystery,” 140).
This article turned out to be so flimsy in terms of sourcing and actual new evidence that less than five days later Phillips published another article detailing proof provided by the lawyers of B.I.G.’s estate that B.I.G. had been in a recording session in New York City at the time that this alleged conspiracy to murder Tupac Shakur was taking place. Moreover, close friends of B.I.G. corroborated this and solidified that he was in New York, not Nevada, at those times. Still, the fact that the Los Angeles Times reported this thinly veiled attack on B.I.G.’s legacy and credibility was indicative of other major developments between the Wallace contingent and the city of Los Angeles.

Voletta Wallace hired attorney Perry Sanders to spearhead a wrongful death suit against the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Although the case ultimately focused on the “deliberate indifference” of the LAPD with respect to the investigation of Biggie Smalls’s murder, author Randall Sullivan and former LAPD detective Russell Poole had been piecing together one of the most extraordinary cases of police corruption and cover-up in history. Sullivan’s book-length expose, Labyrinth, details Russell Poole’s comprehensive investigations into the Rampart scandal and its overlapping connections to the murders of Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur. The Rampart scandal involves various LAPD officers who were part of the CRASH unit, which focused on gang activities. Several officers from this unit have been implicated in various illegal activities, including everything from planting weapons on innocent victims to selling narcotics. Detective Poole’s investigations revealed several incredible facts: (1) Certain CRASH officers were in league with the Bloods gang; (2) a few of these officers, including Ray Perez and David Mack, also worked for Marion “Suge” Knight and Death Row Records at the time of both murders; and (3) the powers that be in the LAPD, the Los Angeles Times, and possibly the city of Los Angeles itself were extremely reluctant to cooperate with Detective Poole when he was leading these investigations or to accurately and fairly report on these matters as information became available. Poole believes that David Mack, employed by Suge Knight, conspired with Amir Muhammed to assassinate Biggie. Muhammed was the alleged trigger man and David Mack provided the drive-by vehicle and helped to case the party and security for B.I.G. immediately preceding the actual hit.

All of this labyrinthine mess came to a head when the Wallace estate’s civil suit was declared a mistrial. The judge ruled that a detective (Steve Katz) in the LAPD had deliberately concealed a tremendous amount of evidence in the Biggie Smalls murder case. She therefore concluded that the department was attempting to conceal David Mack’s involvement in the case. Although she did not find in favor of the Wallace family, the court clearly judged against the nearly nine-year cover-up. “After the mistrial, Wallace’s lawyers were contacted by a number of political figures in Los Angeles—worried that this lawsuit might bankrupt the city” (Sullivan, “Unsolved Mystery,” 142).

Surely these legal maneuverings and mistrials will not be the lasting legacy of Christopher Wallace, aka Notorious B.I.G. In fact, generations of Brooklyn
youth will know him better through the Christopher Wallace Foundation, managed by Voletta Wallace. The foundation’s B.I.G. (books instead of guns) program provides support for students and schools in Biggie’s neighborhood. Ultimately, this will be B.I.G.’s legacy: His impact on youth facing the same challenges he faced will sustain itself based on his short but incredible presence on the hip hop cultural landscape. “Biggie’s legacy is different. Wallace’s lasting imprint on hip hop is more musical than iconographic. He is a master of flow, of lyrical rhythm and technique—the Jordan to Rakim’s Magic. While his catalogue of unreleased records isn’t as large as Tupac’s, the quality of many of the surviving freestyles is unsurpassed” (Coker 293).

See also: Tupac Shakur, Nas, Lil’ Kim, Wu-Tang Clan

WORKS CITED


FURTHER RESOURCES

*Biggie and Tupac: The Story Behind the Murder of Rap’s Biggest Superstars.* Lafayette Films, 2002.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

On a warm July morning in 2006, Kimberly Jones was released from a Pennsylvania correctional facility after having served ten months of a 366-day sentence. This release would mark the launch of the latest version of the rapper’s ever-changing public persona. July 3 would be the next first day in the epic narrative of the Notorious K.I.M. Just shy of her thirtieth birthday, and in just over a decade, Lil’ Kim had established herself as an indelible icon in the temple of hip hop. Having shaken off the qualifying word female from
any and all discussion of her skills, Kim stood shoulder to shoulder with the roughest, baddest, most gangsta rappers. With her fourth album, *The Naked Truth*, receiving critical acclaim, and her assertions that she was only just beginning to control her style, her image, and the way that she was marketed, Jones was poised to become Lil’ Kim once again. Over the course of that July morning, Kimberly Jones shed her prison garb and once again assumed the mantle of Queen Bee. In a pristine white low-cut suit and shades, Lil’ Kim walked beyond the prison gates to an awaiting silver Rolls Royce that sped her and her overjoyed mother back to the pampered life that the tiniest and most provocative member of hip hop’s royalty was accustomed to.

In an effort to protect her bodyguard, Suif Jackson, who was accused of shooting a member of rapper Capone’s entourage during a 2001 confrontation outside of hip hop’s radio Mecca, Hot 97, Kim testified that she couldn’t remember if Jackson had been present that day. Unfortunately for Kim, a security camera revealed that she had been standing beside Jackson moments before the shooting took place. Other members of her posse who were present that day copped plea bargains and cooperated with the prosecution, resulting in a twelve-year sentence for Jackson. Kim was the only one who refused to cooperate, and she was found guilty of obstruction of justice (see sidebar: Hip Hop and the Law).

**Hip Hop and the Law**

*Aine McGlynn*

Lil’ Kim’s year-and-a-day prison sentence is not unusual in the hip hop world. In fact, a little jail time can often increase a rapper’s credibility and provide an excellent marketing opportunity. Released just eight days into her prison term, Kim’s album *The Naked Truth* benefited from all the press that surrounded her impending prison term. 50 Cent has also served some time, as have Chi-Ali, Mystikal, and Tupac. Foxy Brown is currently awaiting trial on an assault charge; Snoop was acquitted of murder; Eminem has faced down weapons charges, and the new editor of *The Source* magazine, Dasun Allah, has faced charges. Popular music, from rock and roll to jazz and blues and even country and western, has always been considered rebel music. The lifestyle of a musician implies an element of subversion or counterculturalism. As a result, musicians are often uncompromising about their individual rights and often don’t care about the law.

Hip hop, though, seems to have more than its share of outlaws. The argument has been made that you can take the thug out of the ghetto but you can’t take the ghetto out of the thug. The mistrust of the law and the disrespect for authority that come with a legacy of harassment by the cops are not easily forgotten. Serving a jail sentence also becomes part of a rapper’s narrative. It can bolster claims to authenticity and make the persona appear 
Never one to do anything without creating a media fuss, Kim decided to go to prison with all eyes focused on her. The press packets for Countdown to Lockdown, a BET reality show chronicling the last few days before Kim went to prison, promised viewers unprecedented access to the notorious life of Lil’ Kim. Perhaps most shocking of all, the producers told viewers to watch as “her glam team starts to peel away all the layers of fabulousness that make Lil’ Kim the celebrity she is, until she is stripped down to a bare Kimberly Jones. No weave, no makeup, no jewelry, Kim is dressed in a T-shirt with none other than Big Poppa’s face on it” (“Lil’ Kim: Countdown to Lockdown”).

This unadorned woman is, they argue, the real Kimberly Jones; the Lil’ Kim veneer is as easily peeled off and discarded as a false eyelash. However, the lines between persona and person are not as distinct as the press writers would have you believe: The insecurity and loudmouthed brashness of Kimberly Jones seep into every stunt that Lil’ Kim pulls. Similarly, Kimberly Jones’s rap persona, be it the Notorious K.I.M., Big Momma, or the ghetto royal Queen Bee, has changed Kimberly Jones. These personas are absorbed into her, leaving Kimberly Jones, from the outside at least, unrecognizable to her childhood self.

THE NOTORIOUS LIFE OF KIMBERLY JONES

Kimberly Jones was born in Brooklyn, New York, on July 11, 1974. Her father was an ex-marine corps officer and a strict disciplinarian who kept Kim, her mother, and her younger brother, Christopher, on a very short leash. Her family described her on VH1’s Driven as a tough child, willing to tussle harder. Street credibility bolsters respect from the rap community while it also pads out the story that accompanies the press release for the latest album.

During Lil’ Kim’s prison term, she composed letters to her fans that emphasized how well she was getting along with her fellow inmates. She described the volleyball team that she joined and the cake that her new friends made for her “record release party.” As a gift to Lil’ Kim, one inmate fashioned a stiletto made entirely out of watermelon Jolly Ranchers. This is hardly the stuff of the stereotypical prison term. Kim failed to mention gangs, strategic allegiances, shanks, or days spent in solitary. Nonetheless, Kim served her time and her album did rather well, garnering her nominations for Vibe’s Album of the Year and BET’s Female Rapper of the Year.

If nothing else, the steady stream of rappers to the courthouse raises attention to the culture of litigation and imprisonment that exists in America. The heavy-handedness of drug laws and controversial racial profiling have all led to stifling conditions both within overcrowded detention centers and for those trying to stay beneath the sweeping radar of law enforcement.
with anyone, but nonetheless not a tomboy. At a young age she pranced around in her mother’s clothing, makeup, and shoes. Ruby Mitchell-Jones worked at high-end department stores. She loved fashion, a love that Kim developed early in life. As her fame grew, she translated that love into a style that was imitative of no one and that no one in their right mind would dare imitate (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Fashion).

Kim’s talents were not nurtured by her father, with whom she butted heads to such an extent that the police were called several times to attend to their

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**Hip Hop and Fashion**  
_Aine McGlynn_

Hip hop has always been about style. Afrika Bambaataa, a pioneer of hip hop sounds, was also an early trendsetter for the hip hop aesthetic. His style choices were always bold and fiercely individual. He ushered in the hip hop artist as trendsetter. Run-DMC made popular the iconic hip hop look: jeans, track jackets, pristine white shelltoe Adidas sneakers, shades, and gold chains, and always a hat. Rappers and hip hop heads continue to riff on this look, wearing baggier jeans, diamond-encrusted chains, even whiter sneakers, a sports jersey of some description, and always a hat.

Hip hop has always intersected with fashion because rappers have always rhymed about the labels that they wear. Kangol hats topped most domes in the early eighties, and Missy Elliott still often sports the brand. Run-DMC’s famous track “My Adidas” made pop culture icons out of the brand. Rappers have always tended to be a step ahead of popular trends and often anticipate those styles that find their way to the runway. It wasn’t long before huge gold chains, doorknocker earrings, and athletic chic were incorporated into Karl Lagerfeld, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton runway shows. Recognizing the purchasing power of the hip hop audience, the fashion world was quick to catch on to the styles that rappers would rock in their videos and in performances. The watershed moment for the commercial intersection of fashion and hip hop occurred in a 1994 performance by Snoop Dogg on _Saturday Night Live_. Snoop came out clad in an oversized Tommy Hilfiger rugby shirt and overnight, Hilfiger became a brand that would be forever linked with the rap community. Tommy Hilfiger himself would win the title of Menswear Designer of the Year by the Style Council of America in 1995. For a label that had languished in relative obscurity, dressing prep-school kids for country club dances, the jump to the center of the street culture and aesthetic sent the company in a totally different direction.

Different regions of the country have contributed to the various styles that rappers rock. From West Coast Chicanos, the huge T-shirts and jeans; from the south, the gold and diamond grills that cover people’s teeth; from New York, Afrocentric images of the continent, of Marcus Garvey, and T-shirts featuring the black, red, green, and yellow of African pride.
disputes. In her late teenage years, Kim picked up a kitchen knife and tried to stab her father during one particularly nasty argument. Her mother, having left her father, was living out of her car, and thus was in no position to assist Kim’s aspirations of fame. At barely seventeen years of age, Kim left her father’s home after being told that she was not welcome to move with him, his new wife, and her brother to their new house in New Jersey. Instead, Kim was left to her own devices in the rough Brooklyn neighborhood around Ryerson Towers. A teenaged girl without a family or a home to go to for help and support is compelled to do a number of things in order to survive. In interviews, her friends and family describe Kim as doing whatever she could to make ends meet. She ran errands for drug dealers, who delighted in having a pretty young female around. Though she never states it outright, the implication is strong that Kim had to prostitute herself.

Kim was hustling. She relied on the kindness of friends, crashing on couches here and there; but she still had her eyes focused on a career as a performer. She grabbed the mic at every basement party she found herself at, rapping, singing, sometimes just running her mouth over any record the DJ threw on the decks. She began to develop a reputation in the neighborhood, mostly because of her tiny frame, relentless energy, and surprising ferocity.

Right around this time, Christopher Wallace, aka the Notorious B.I.G., aka Biggie Smalls, was coming up out of the same Brooklyn neighborhood. Puffy Combs had been promoting Biggie with Uptown Records, and through appearances on other artists’ tracks—namely Mary J. Blige, 2Pac, and Big Daddy Kane in the early nineties—the larger-than-most MC began to garner some attention. In the meantime, he had heard about Kim through the network of Brooklyn’s hip hop hopefuls and introduced himself to her. She was shy at first, but he encouraged her to drop a few rhymes for him and, to his surprise, this under-five-feet-tall, sweet smiling girl could spit with an intensity that rappers twice her size could never muster. Kim and Biggie had an intense connection made of complex layers of lust and sexual energy, genuine love and affection, marketing strategies and showbiz realities, jealousy, money, and burgeoning fame.

In 1994, while his career was just about to blow up with the release of Ready to Die, Biggie’s attention turned to building the careers of the Brooklyn rappers that he had come up with. He began Junior M.A.F.I.A. (Masters at Finding Intelligent Attitudes), a posse made up of Biggie’s Brooklyn crew. Kim became Big Momma in the Mafia. She was described as Biggie’s lieutenant, running the show with Big Poppa. Atlantic Records released 500 copies
of “Player’s Anthem” in 1994 to see what the street-level reaction would be. The track blew up, and a subsequent performance of it at Harlem’s famous Apollo Theater announced Kim’s arrival.

Biggie got a reaction when he rapped, but when Kim, the tiny woman standing next to his 300-plus-pound immensity, got up and matched his rhyme, crowds lost their minds. Biggie implied that he was going to set up Kim as the next big thing in hip hop. He introduced her to his mother as his artist and went about styling her to sell her own records, while also promoting his own career. Kim was to be his protégé, but he needed her help to invent a persona for himself. At street level, where their fame was biggest, it served Biggie to make this woman appear to be the most vicious sexual animal possible in order to position himself as her conqueror. They struck a remarkable pose together; the four-feet-eleven-inch woman and the 300-pound, six-feet-plus man styling themselves as a thugged-out Bonnie and Clyde.

The promotional posters for *Hard Core*, her debut album in 1996, featured Kim in a leopard print bikini, crouched down to the floor, legs spread wide. It was a poster that shocked Biggie’s mother, who demanded to know what he was doing to her. Biggie remained insistent that it was her sex that would sell the album. And sell it did. The album debuted at number eleven on the Billboard 200 and number two on the rap chart. Three singles from the album went to the top of the rap chart, with “Not Tonight (Ladies Night)” earning her a Grammy Award nomination.

As Biggie acknowledged, as record producers proclaimed, as the fans at the shows realized, this woman could spit fire on the mic. This was evident in the listening. Up until this point, female rappers had rocked a groovy neo-soul line, or a Native Tongues pro-black, pro-woman style. MC Lyte was the rapper Kim was musically most reminiscent of. Lyte had represented Brooklyn with a similar intensity, but faded by the early nineties. Then, hip hop underwent a revolution when the center of creativity shifted from the East to the West Coast in the early nineties. Gangsta rap, characterized by misogyny and hypermasculinity, appeared to have no room for female MCs. Lil’ Kim came along and changed all that, ushering in a new era of female rap for herself, Foxy Brown, Missy Elliott, Eve, Da Brat, and Trina; but in spite of her skills, Kim still had to prove herself with her body first. Her rhymes were an extra bonus. For Kim though, the rhymes were about the clothes, or lack thereof, and the style she rocked was about visually representing what she rapped about. She acknowledges this intersection of skimpy clothes and red-hot lyricism on the track “Single Black Female” from *The Notorious K.I.M.* She rhymes, “If I dress freaky that’s my business.”

Kim wasn’t always so scantily clad. In the early days, she performed with Junior M.A.F.I.A. in fly Versace suits and furs, but with *Hard Core*, the clothes came right off. During the recording of the album, Biggie and Kim’s relationship reached new levels of drama. Biggie married Faith Evans within weeks of meeting her. Some say the union was a marketing ploy to hype both
their albums; this clearly did not sit well with Kim, a woman who had been loyal and devoted to Biggie, but who also challenged him, giving as good as she got. Their relationship was often violent, with Biggie reportedly dragging her across a hotel lobby by her hair one particularly nasty but not uncharacteristic evening, and Kim threatening to kill Biggie on several occasions.

After Biggie and Evans’s marriage, Kim was relegated to the status of mistress. She wasn’t Biggie’s second in command, she was his second-string lover, one with whom he wouldn’t have a child, leaving Kim to abort a pregnancy during the recording of Hard Core. Kim could never mother Biggie’s children. She was his sexpot, a raunchy provocateur for rap fans to ogle while behind her back, Biggie and his male fans could share a sly moment of collective male sexual prowess.

With her album on the charts, her name on the lips of ghetto princes and princesses, and her tracks garnering critical and industry attention, it was clear that Lil’ Kim was a legitimate hip hop success story. But her success was soon tainted by tragedy. In March 1997, Biggie was shot and killed leaving an event in Los Angeles. It wasn’t long before a veritable satellite industry grew up around posthumous releases of Big’s rhymes. Puffy rode Biggie’s death to massive success for Bad Boy Records, including a huge tribute hit with “I’ll Be Missing You,” featuring Faith Evans. Kim, however, was not invited to star on the song, although she was devastated by Biggie’s death. She had lost her lover, her collaborator, her mentor, and her friend. Evans got to release the lament for Big, while Kim, two years after his death, performed on the hyped party track “N.O.T.O.R.I.O.U.S.” Though she couldn’t be Biggie’s wife, Kim could enact the true depth of their connection in her rhymes. While he was alive, Kim was styled to represent Big’s sexual prowess. After his death, Kim was free to recoup him as her partner and reposition herself as his equal and his collaborator.

In the four-year gap between Hard Core and her follow-up album, The Notorious K.I.M., rumors abounded that Kim’s career was over. In spite of her attempts to assert herself as Biggie’s equal, it was repeatedly suggested that Biggie had written all her rhymes and that he had coached her on every line on both the Junior M.A.F.I.A. tracks and her own album. One could understand the accusation, especially listening to “No Time,” a hit track featuring Puffy, where Kim’s delivery is reminiscent of the hard-hitting, bass-heavy staccato, grunts, and internal rhymes that were characteristic of Big’s style. Big echoes in Kim’s delivery on “No Time” when she says “butta leathers and mad cheddaz.” Biggie’s style of punctuating the beat with the rhymed word and his thick, lazy delivery are all evident on Hard Core. Given the fact that Big was determined to shape Kim’s career to reflect his own authority as a hip hop mogul, his influence is unquestionably all over Kim’s first album. Kim’s 2005 album, The Naked Truth, suffers from a similar sort of parroted style. On “Quiet” the beat is reminiscent of Eminem’s “Lose Yourself,” while the escalating punctuated aggression of her rhyme
style sounds like Eminem’s as well. On “Durty” she mimics Sean Paul’s dance hall delivery, and her single “Lighters Up” also rocks a reggae style.

After Biggie’s death, Kim felt immense pressure to produce an album that would convince the hip hop audience of her skills as a writer and MC with her own individual style. Under the guidance of Puffy, who was still hard at work marketing Biggie’s death for all it was worth, Kim was encouraged to shed still more clothes and to take her already raunchy lyrics to a whole new level. It was in this interim between the first and second albums that Kim began her dramatic transformation into the Lil’ Kim who both aggravates and fascinates black feminists.

LIL’ KIM’S PERSONAL FEMINISM

There are many, sometimes competing, definitions of feminism and feminists. bell hooks once said that feminism is about “talking back to essentializing discourses that have defined women in demeaning ways and pushing boundaries within an environment oppressive to women” (quoted in Guillory 29). Kim refused to be essentialized, to be lumped into a category of female rapper. Her desire was to be respected outright, as an MC with skills who didn’t see being a woman as a handicap. Gangsta rap is notoriously hateful of women, and Kim’s unabashed boasting about her skills, her body, and her ability to threaten men by her very femininity aligns her with hooks’s definition of feminism—in theory. But Lil’ Kim is never so easy to encapsulate.

Tricia Rose, in an interview with MC Lyte, defined feminism for the rapper. MC Lyte belonged to an older generation of female MCs who, along with the likes of Queen Latifah, resisted the label of feminism for fear that they would be seen as anti–black male. This is the choice that black feminism has always had to make, between two solidarities; one based on race, the other based on gender. Rose suggested to MC Lyte that feminism didn’t have to be a dirty word, or necessitate the choosing of loyalties. A feminist, then, could be a woman who “wrote, spoke or behaved in a way that was pro-woman, in that she supported situations that were trying to better the lives of women” (176). The case could certainly be made that on tracks such as “I’m Human,” where she intones that the new millennium will belong to women, Kim adopts a pro-woman stance. Nonetheless, Kim’s relationship with feminism is more subtle and nuanced than either hooks’s or Rose’s definitions allow. The main trouble with their definitions in relation to Lil’ Kim lies in the fact that both talk about a collective of women. Kim’s feminism is about her specifically unique position as a woman, not about the plight of women generally. It is here that Kim stands apart from her female predecessors in the rap game, especially Queen Latifah.

Queen Latifah’s music video for the song “Ladies First” is an example of the type of feminism that the mainstream can support and comprehend.
The video features Latifah rapping with images of South African women and children projected on a screen behind her. Latifah here is a benevolent queen, concerned with the plight of her weakest subjects and determined to align herself with their struggle so that they might benefit from her power. Kim, on the other hand, chose to adopt the moniker of the Queen Bee, the singular, lone female in a world of male drones who labor unquestioningly to ensure her comfort and survival. Their own survival depends on it.

The Queen Bee, both the one in the hive and the one who prances down red carpets, is also utterly self-centered. The only female whose life Kim is trying to improve is her own. This feminism, characterized by a woman who puts herself before any collective struggle, is influenced by the harshest, most self-centered dictums of survival in the capitalist market. The hip hop style of the gangsta, with which Kim most obviously aligns herself, rejects the morality of the black middle class. Gilroy calls this resistance to community uplift and the politics of racial solidarity “the ghetto-centric individualism of the poor” (266). For the poor, it is the self that must first be lifted up out of oppression. The community comes second.

For Kim, there were only a limited number of places at the top of the rap game, and her efforts were always directed toward securing her own place at that apex. There is no sense in Lil’ Kim’s music that she will make personal sacrifices for the good of the larger collective. For instance, in “Doin’ It Way Big” on La Bella Mafia, in direct contradiction to Latifah’s attempts to represent for South Africans, Kim boasts that she gets her diamonds “straight out the Kimberly gold mine in Africa.” Totally oblivious, or perhaps uncaring, about the history of horrendous labor practices in South African mines and the devastating environmental effects of the gold industry, Kim’s boast is characteristic of the American individualism that places acquisition above political responsibility at every turn. Kim’s song predated Kanye West’s “Diamonds (from Sierra Leone)” (2005), which criticized hip hop stars for supporting the diamond trade.

Kim’s individualist feminism is nonetheless realist. It embraces the truth of existing in a value exchange economy where each individual, male or female, is required to bring their goods to market to sell. Kim’s feminism is defined by the fact that as a woman, she seeks to achieve the highest price possible for her single most precious and valuable product: her sex. A line in “Heavenly Father” on La Bella Mafia reveals Kim’s price. Her manager remarks that if you want Kim, it will cost $75,000 and “that’s just for conversation.” Kim prices herself out of the range of your average prostitute, but her critics still easily make the comparison. Lil Kim’s raunchy lyrics have been read as disparaging to women and as reducing women to sexual playthings, but Kim’s feminism is about how she uses her own sexuality to secure the future that she wants for herself. In Kim’s lyrics, her sexuality is a powerful tool necessary to her survival in the rap game. While male gangsta rappers often include sexual aggression in their boasts of how violent and
threatening they can be, Kim boasts about her sexual abilities. In “Gimmie That” from her 2005 album *Naked Truth*, she boasts that she has the “tightest, rightest vagina.”

The differences between the way men and women rap about sex are evident in Lil’ Kim’s collaborations with male artists. “Gimmie That” features Maino and Kim in a conversation about their sexual prowess and conquests. Maino claims he can dominate a girl and Kim insists that her body has the power to leave a man insane, spent, and ruined for any other woman. In the context of “Gimmie That,” and in the larger context of hip hop and sex, both male and female MCs claim to hold the power in sex. On “Magic Stick,” a track that Kim recorded with 50 Cent, both MCs refer to their genitals as magic. Kim is also known to adapt men’s sexual slang for her own songs, such as “Suck My Dick” from *Notorious K.I.M*. In this song and “Not Tonight,” Kim redefines rap’s view of sex, making it first and foremost about the woman’s pleasure.

The competition between men and women on the microphone has become more and more explicitly sexual since the early 1980s beef that Roxanne Shanté started with the male MCs of the group U.T.F.O. This competition in itself is useful in that it sparks dialogue between men and women rappers, but when rappers’ rhymes become obsessed with the quest for sexual dominance, they can risk giving listeners a dangerous impression: Listeners can begin to associate hypersexual aggression with black men and women, which is a dangerous racial stereotype.

**KIM’S INIMITABLE STYLE**

Kim has become closely connected with designer Marc Jacobs. Before she went to prison, Kim and Jacobs collaborated on a T-shirt emblazoned with Kim’s image and the words “I love Lil’ Kim” on the back. The shirt was sold to benefit a Brooklyn youth organization called the Door. Kim has of late been accompanying Jacobs to events and has restyled herself as his muse. In Jacobs’s styles, Kim has found a more sophisticated, demure, less garish way to set herself apart from the baggy-clothes-wearing, sneaker-sporting, iced-out thugs who have defined the look of the hip hop nation.

Whether a sign of maturity or a transformation that has occurred since her conviction, Kim no longer seems to choose clothing that will create as much media attention as possible. In one outfit from the late nineties, Kim stepped out in hot pink hair extensions, a skin-tight, white off-the-shoulder dress tied closed on one side with multicolored ribbons, fishnet stockings, and knee-high boots with matching hot pink tassels. Emblazoned across the front of the dress were the words “look at me.” It would be impossible not to. Outfits such as these epitomize Kim’s disregard for the distinction between good and bad press. Still, in spite of her recent turn to haute couture, she doesn’t seem to place too much stock in evaluations of her clothing.
Kim’s most notorious style choice was undoubtedly the purple one (er, two?) piece jump suit that she wore to the 1999 MTV Video Music Awards. The spandex outfit left one of her breasts completely exposed, save for a strategic pasty. It made for a remarkable television moment when Diana Ross playfully fondled Kim’s breast in incredulous amusement, while a positively dowdy-looking (by comparison) Mary J. Blige looked on. That was a significant year for Kim’s style. Coming in the four-year interim between her debut and sophomore albums (a long stretch by anyone’s count), the onus for Kim was to garner as much attention as possible. Worse than being judged a fashion disaster was being forgotten altogether. That same year, she stepped out to the VH1-Vogue fashion awards in a diamond-studded bodice, sheer skirt, and elaborate tiara/superhero mask with the letters QB studded out in diamonds over her forehead. These wardrobe choices reflect the ongoing trajectory of the inimitable style that Kim boasted even in her childhood in Brooklyn. “She was wearing Gucci before anybody knew what Gucci was,” recalls her childhood friend Mo for VH1’s Driven (“Lil’ Kim”).

The conservative morality that characterizes the disparaging appraisals of Kim’s racy and outlandish fashion sense reveals the radical potential of Kim’s fashion choices. Kim’s fashion sense is another point of proof of the distance she maintains between her public identity and any type of collective or group. Her outfits are always left of center, always unexpected. Like the feminism that she styles to suit her own personal gains, fashion too is subjected to Kim’s individualism. Not wishing to look like anyone else, Kim’s style challenges the notion of solidarity through style.

Clothes often establish group memberships and identify the wearer with a specific set of ideas, politics, and projections. To refuse to look like the black collective (unlike Latifah, Erykah Badu, and Lauryn Hill, who take up the aesthetic of African solidarity) is to resist the myth of the essential unity of all people who share a particular skin color. Kim will never adopt an Afrocentric style or view of the world. The popular critical view is that her provocative clothes undermine the empowerment that black women are trying to achieve. It is also possible to read her style as a critique of race-based solidarities. Rather than find power in the sheer numbers contained in the black American collective, Kim’s movement away from that style and its attendant politics inadvertently critiques the African American discourse of black unity.

Kim’s experience of the ghetto was that it was full of black people, and all of them were poor and struggling. Here was a solidarity of black people in large numbers, but their numbers were irrelevant. As a group, they were barred from accessing the great capitalist American dream. Afrocentrism tends to try to step back from capitalism and the patriotism of the American nation-state. It is possible to interpret Afrocentrism as a discourse that continues to criticize Americans of a certain skin tone who cash in and check out of the projects. Kim defends that choice to make money and get out of the ghetto by any means necessary by stylistically separating herself from her critics.
THE ARTIST WHO FORMERLY LOOKED LIKE LIL’ KIM

Unsurprisingly, women tend not to be as enthralled by Kim’s silicone breasts, or may be enthralled by them for different reasons. In a 2000 article in *Essence* magazine, written in the form of a letter to Lil’ Kim, Akissi Britton calls out Kim’s central contradiction: She refers to Kim as a “self proclaimed feminist who is a poster girl for plastic surgery” and a “Black sex symbol who re-created herself to look like a blond Barbie doll” (112). Kim has tried to maintain the image of an ultraconfident woman with a “fuck you” attitude, but the plastic surgery suggests otherwise. Britton argues that there is a frightened and vulnerable woman beneath the altered exterior and that Kim has a responsibility to that woman. Being responsible to herself, to the realization that “money doesn’t change the feeling of exploitation” would, Britton assumes, result in Kim taking into account every black woman who has had to bear the real-life consequences of the way that race and gender are represented in the rap industry. Kim claims to care about real women. The track “Hold On” (*Notorious K.I.M.*) reveals a woman in grief. She raps “to my ladies” that she knows what they are going through. Nonetheless, on another album she rhymes about broke bitches, raggedy-ass bitches, and so on, separating herself by virtue of her money from the poverty that affects the lives of many of her listeners.

Kim responds to the pressure to live up to the hype with which she is marketed. Her appearance has undeniably changed over the last few years. Her nose has shrunk as her breasts have gotten bigger. Her lips have grown plumper, her eyes are often hidden behind blue contacts, and her hair is as likely to be green as it is to be blonde. Beginning with Biggie encouraging her to play up her sexiness, the pressure escalated in the years between her first and second albums when the hip hop world waited to see if she could produce an album without Biggie’s input. The success of the image that accompanied her first album, the loss of Biggie, the impact of being portrayed as Biggie’s bitch, and the fear of failing on her second album, all led to the troubling equation, sex = money = power. It’s evident that on *Notorious K.I.M.* and *La Bella Mafia* she stretched that equation to its breaking point. “How Many Licks” on the former album is one of the raunchiest singles to receive airplay, while “The Jump Off” on the latter album mentions fourteen separate product brands. The sex and money are certainly present, but where is Kim’s power?

Kim’s skin in recent photos is considerably lighter than earlier in her career; her hair is blonde, her eyes blue, her nose thinner and her lips fuller. Because she has undergone so much plastic surgery, some fans and critics have compared Kim to Michael Jackson. Jackson is criticized because he has used plastic surgery to lighten his skin and feminize his features, thereby morphing himself out of the prescribed categories of gender and race. Although Kim’s appearance did not become masculine in the same way that Jackson’s became
feminine, her most outlandish styles mimicked the fashion style of drag queens. This look tries to overemphasize feminine qualities. The breasts become huge, the eyebrows overarched, the waist cinched. The drag queen tries to look more than female in his attempt to hide his masculinity and convince the world of her feminine beauty. Kim isn’t trying to look like a transvestite, but she overemphasizes her femininity in the same way, making it appear that her own sense of femininity is not secure. Further, the thinning of her nose, the lightening of her skin, and the bleaching of her hair have all led to criticisms that Kim is trying to look like a white woman or play up to concepts of beauty that are rooted in white culture instead of black culture.

THE AUTHENTIC RAPPER

The loudest accusations that Kim was becoming white accompanied her recent alignment with such Hollywood society names as Donatella Versace, Marc Jacobs, and Victoria Gotti. The timing indicates that perhaps the critiques were equal parts discomfort with a woman who doesn’t fit into rigid gender or racial categories and a discomfort with the shift in Kim’s class position. It is easy to hate someone who used to be poor and then ostentatiously flaunts wealth. Any deviation on Kim’s part from what observers determine is her most real subject position—poor, black, and female—is read as a betrayal or an instance of dishonesty. Kim has tried to counter these criticisms in her music and in interviews over the years. In “This Is Who I Am,” a track on La Bella Mafia, Kim rapped unapologetically about having big breasts, about how you can’t take the hood out of her, about how she’ll never change. This song, as well as “Shut Up Bitch” from The Naked Truth, are explicit attempts to recoup her credibility within the hip hop community. On these tracks, Kim projects an attitude that aggressively defends her deviations from what others have decided was her most authentic self, which was the identity or persona she projected on her first recordings.

In a 2005 article in Popular Music and Society, Mickey Hess makes the point that rappers adopt a performative persona in order to deal with the contradictions between the identity that the ghetto demands from the performer and the identity that the market demands. He argues that if the rapper cannot satisfy the standards of authenticity and street credibility that the ghetto requires, then the marketing strategy falls apart. The question becomes how closely the persona, Lil Kim, represents the identity of the person, Kimberly Jones. Lil’ Kim exists in the public as an iconic, imaginative construction of a set of carefully staged performances, outfits, press releases, albums, and photographs. This woman can kick back on a yacht in a video and be brash, unemotional, hard, and confident to the last. Kimberly Jones, however, exists in a world that is governed by the rules of economics, citizenship, time, and space. This latter world has consequences, is messy, unpredictable, full of joys...
and sorrows. This is the world where a woman feels the actual pain of recovering from plastic surgery, where she falls apart upon her lover’s death, where her looks make her insecure.

Gangsta rap in particular depends on the rapper telling (and to some extent living out) a story that the listener believes to be true. In other words, 50 Cent is respected because he has been shot. Incarceration, shoot-outs, growing up in the projects—all of these are staples of the authentic gangsta rapper. Remember Vanilla Ice? Remember how hard he tried to be hard? Remember his downfall when everyone discovered that he was from a nice middle-class suburb of Dallas? The equation then would appear to be that in order to achieve respect, and album sales, the rapper and the individual must be one and the same. It is, in fact, far more complex than this. The distinction between persona and person begins with a name. Eminem is not Marshal Mathers, Snoop Dogg is not Calvin Brodis, Puffy is not Sean Combs, and Lil’ Kim, the Queen Bitch, is not Kimberly Jones. Every rapper’s government identity, or given name, refers to a personality that is apart from the moniker under which they rap. This personality tends to be more somber, subdued, less theatrical. He or she is the named defendant in a trial, some mother’s child, the name on the tombstone that brackets the hip hop name; Christopher “Biggie Smalls” Wallace, Eric “Eazy-E” Wright, Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes. In adopting a moniker, or a persona to sell to the public, the performer protects this government identity from becoming a commodity. More sacred than the persona, the performer’s government name is the wizard behind the curtain, the intelligent design that orchestrates the selling of the persona. Like the rest of us, such persons have insecurities, strengths, traumas, desires, joys, and so on, that they grapple with outside of and occasionally, when they are being honest, inside their music.

With her 2005 album, The Naked Truth, some unification is happening between Kim’s persona and Kimberly Jones. She enacts the tough bitch persona in front of the judge, saying on “Slippin’” that “the Bee don’t budge.” This is the Queen Bee performing the thug loyalty which stipulates that you don’t rat out the members of your posse. This performance had dire consequences for Ms. Jones, who was imprisoned as a result of this act. She associates her choice to perjure herself with having grown up in the projects and suggests that that history is worth more than anything else. In this track, Lil’ Kim finds a point of unity between her ghetto childhood, the performer that she inhabits, and the woman that she has become as a result of the intersection of those two personalities.

**LIL’ KIM AND FOXY BROWN**

The competition that is fostered between hip hop acts was most famously and tragically played out in the East Coast–West Coast “war” that the popular
media blamed for the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. On smaller and less deadly scales, feuds often take place in hip hop between individual rappers and are played out in lyrical jabs. Lil’ Kim got involved in a verbal war with Foxy Brown, a rapper who has been styled in a manner similar to Lil’ Kim. The two women released debut albums at the same time, and both spit raunchy, sexually aggressive rhymes. Though the two were formerly friends, their record companies set them up as competitors (and they do compete for a similar slice of the rap audience) and a feud has continued between them ever since. Their conflict is fueled by the fact that Foxy is under contract with Def Jam, while Lil’ Kim belongs to Atlantic (Puffy’s Bad Boy Records’ parent company). They represent each company cashing in on a gangsta bitch who will spit fire, wear next to nothing, and have male fans drooling over her while admiring the men with whom they appear on tracks, in videos, and on stage.

In 2000, Foxy appeared on a track for Capone-N-Noreaga’s album and spit a verse calling Lil’ Kim out for milking her Biggie connection for profit and fame. Foxy rapped that Kim was a whore and called her Junior M.A.F.I.A. family her “faggots” who “act more bitch than” she does. Kim responded on “I Came Back for You” (La Bella Mafia), calling Foxy “this Doo Doo Brown bitch.” Kim did not take kindly to Foxy’s accusations and the conflict came to an inevitable head in September 2001 outside of New York hip hop radio station Hot 97 (see sidebar: Hot 97, Where Hip Hop Lives and Dies). It is

**Hot 97, Where Hip Hop Lives and Dies**

*Aine McGlynn*

Hot 97, WQHT, is a New York–based radio station that claims to be the “Home of Hip Hop.” With such iconic DJs as Angie Martinez and Funkmaster Flex at the station, their claim is not that far off. In the halcyon days of the early nineties, before the airwaves were controlled by Clear Channel Communication and playlists were entirely determined by corporate interests, DJs had far more control over what they could put on the air. As a result, Flex brought several underground acts to major success, such as De La Soul and Tribe Called Quest. He was the first DJ to play Jay-Z’s debut, “Reasonable Doubt,” in 1996. Angie has clout in the industry as well, having released her own album with big-name guest stars and having appeared on such tracks as the Grammy-nominated “Ladies Night” with Lil’ Kim and Missy Elliott. Every up-and-coming rapper wants to get an on-air interview with either Angie or Flex. Their approval often translates into significant album sales.

Hot 97 is an impromptu second home for many rappers. During the black-out in New York City in the summer of 2003, basketball star LeBron James and a group of rappers reportedly spent the night in the lobby of the Hot 97 building. The station has seen its share of controversies, many of which
involved publicity stunts that pushed the level of decency a little too far. Among the many tricky on-air moments, Smackfest was probably the worst. Pairs of women were invited into the studio to exchange blows on air. A winner was chosen each morning based on her style and enthusiasm. Paired with tasteless joking about Aaliyah’s death and the 2004 Asian tsunami, the shock tactics of the DJs have garnered all sorts of negative press for the station.

As hip hop’s unofficial mecca, there is no shortage of high-powered rappers milling around the building that houses Hot 97. They are often accompanied by their posses, which are sometimes twenty people strong. Because feuds between rappers are characteristic in hip hop, encounters between two rappers’ posses often lead to trouble. It was outside Hot 97 that a member of 50 Cent’s entourage was reportedly shot after tensions between 50 and a former member of G-Unit, the Game, escalated. 50 dissed the Game on the air in an interview with Flex, and the beef turned into gun violence shortly after. The sidewalk outside Hot 97 was also the scene of the gun battle between Lil’ Kim’s posse and Capone, Foxy Brown’s recording partner, which landed one man in the hospital and two in prison, and resulted in Kim’s incarceration as well.

Like many of the rappers it promotes, Hot 97 has been involved in legal battles, including one in response to attempts to evict the station from its building in Greenwich Village. In hip hop, there is no such thing as bad press, and the violence that occurred outside the station is a validation of Hot 97’s position as center stage for the dramatic happenings in the rap world.

reported that Kim’s entourage met rapper Capone’s posse and words were exchanged, followed by gunfire. Foxy has called for a truce, as has Kim. At one time they were asked to record an album together, tentatively titled *Thelma and Louise*. The possibility of these two pairing up as a couple of vigilante women who intend to punish men for their piggishness is a provocative prospect. What is troubling of course about the comparison of Foxy and Kim to Thelma and Louise is the fact that in the end, all outlaw women are either reigned in by the law or choose death in order to escape it. Nonetheless, if Kim and Foxy were to unite on an album, the gesture, though it might alienate them, would be more powerful than each woman separately fading into obscurity as the public becomes tired of seeing their cleavage and pouty faces.

“WHO YOU CALLIN’ A BITCH?” KIM’S IMPACT AND LEGACY

Kim refers to herself as “Queen Bitch,” indicating a complex relationship between the B-word and the way that female and male rappers use it. Female rappers try to reappropriate the word in the same way that nigger has been
appropriated by gangsta rappers. Unlike *nigger*, which had to be reclaimed from white racists, *bitch* had to be taken back from men who use it in a derogatory manner. For example on N.W.A.’s classic “A Bitch Is a Bitch” (*Straight Outta Compton*), or Dr. Dre’s 1992 “Bitches Ain’t Shit” (*The Chronic*) *bitch* is synonymous with *woman* and bitches are no more than whores. Kim turns that accusation around on “Suck My Dick” (*Notorious K.I.M.*), rapping that it’s “niggas” who “ain’t shit.” For a woman, *nigga* stands in for *bitch* as a derogatory word when it is used aggressively.

Missy Elliott describes her use of the word *bitch* to identify herself. She suggests that in order to be successful in the rap industry, a woman has to be a bitch. In most industries this is the case. Women in power, such as Oprah Winfrey, Martha Stewart, or Condoleezza Rice, routinely have to deal with being called a bitch while their male counterparts, who are just as aggressive or even more so, are admired for knowing what they want and going to any lengths to get it. Missy feels that “she is a bitch in power,” and that there is nothing wrong with having to “put your foot down.” This is a definition of *bitch* that recoups the word from being associated with whorishness. It re-establishes it as a word that indicates power.

When Kim calls herself the Queen Bitch, it is a call to the rap world that she is on top of the pyramid of female rappers. While it also makes a troubling concession to male rappers who think of all women as bitches, her use of the word is preemptive and protective. Using the word to identify herself prevents it being used against her. If Kim uses the word first, then the power that it carries to insult and offend is neutralized. In an interlude on one of Missy’s albums, Kim identifies herself and Missy as “rich motherfuckin’ bitches, that’s right” (*Checkin’ for You,* on *Da Real World*). Missy and Kim occupy the same position in terms of wealth and authority. They are peers, so the use of the term is playful and empowering. In the same way that *queer* and *nigger*, used among a group of people who can identify those words with reclaimed power, *bitch* can imply comfort and solidarity. Nonetheless at its root, whether it is used as a self-identification or in a derogatory sense, all three words carry a legacy of offense and violence. Proof of this lies in the fact that each word can still be used as a put-down.

*Bitch* is still thrown around as a means of demonstrating power and aggression. On *The Naked Truth*, the track “Shut Up Bitch” features a chorus of Kim’s haters discussing various rumors about her plastic surgery, her relationship with Biggie, and her jail sentence. Each speculative sentence is answered with the refrain, “Shut up bitch!” It is clear that in this situation, the word is describing someone who is misinformed, jealous, and petty. In short, it becomes obvious that a bitch occupies two opposing categories: the woman with power, the “rich muthafuckin’ bitch”; or the woman without power, the woman equated with whorishness, ignorance, and poverty. When a woman is called a bitch by someone more powerful than she is, and men can be included in this category, the implication is that what she has to say doesn’t
matter. When that same woman calls her equal a bitch, she is saying that she has authority over the word, and that what she has to say is important. Finally, when she calls herself a bitch, she does so with an authority that silences everybody, men and women alike.

See also: MC Lyte, Notorious B.I.G., Queen Latifah, Roxanne Shanté

WORKS CITED


FURTHER RESOURCES


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Outkast

T. Hasan Johnson

ATLIENS IN ELEVATORS: PIMPS, GANGSTAS, AND SAGES RISEN FROM SOUTHERN STREETS

Andre Benjamin and Antwon Patton attended Tri-Cities High School in East Point, Georgia, and developed what would one day become one of the most influential groups in hip hop. Andre, born May 27, 1975, is also known as André (Ice Cold) 3000, Dookie, Dre, Johnny Vulture, Benjamin André, and...
finally Andre 3000. Patton, born February 1, 1975, has maintained his moniker Big Boi, alongside Lucius Leftfoot and Daddy Fat Sax. Outkast has become one of the most significant hip hop groups of all time, with Big Boi developing his patented rhyme style over the years while staying true to the sound of the Dirty South. Andre, on the other hand, has managed to develop a reputation for consistently changing his style of dress, performance (from rapping to singing and playing guitar), and overall rhyme flow. Their eclectic yet complementary styles work perfectly; Dre is perceived as the free-spirited artist, and Big Boi the anchor that keeps Outkast grounded in their cultural roots.

At the onset of their relationship, the two seemed to be at odds. Meeting in 1990, they developed a somewhat adversarial relationship by lyrically battling one another. It did not take very long for them to develop a respect for one another’s lyrical skills. Benjamin was an only child and grew up with his mother until the age of fifteen, when he decided to moved in with his father. Patton, on the other hand, grew up in Savannah, Georgia, with his brothers and sisters and later moved to East Point as a teenager. It is said that they met at a party where Benjamin was supposedly standing in a corner holding a beer in one hand and a gun in the other. After that, they were said to have developed a close friendship, eventually forming their first group, called 2 Shades Deep.

2 Shades Deep was pursued by the Atlanta production group Organized Noize, and in 1992, Big Boi and Dre renamed themselves Outkast and officially signed with LaFace Records. As a southern group emerging into a hip hop world divided into categories of East Coast and West Coast, the name fit. Outkast became part of a larger hip hop collective called the Dungeon Family, which included Organized Noize and Outkast, as well Goodie Mob, and various other Atlanta MCs and singers. The Dungeon Family roster included Andre, Big Boi, Big Gipp, Cee-Lo, Debrah Killings, Konkrete, Kujo Goodie, Sleepy Brown, and T-Mo. Organized Noize producers Patrick “Sleepy” Brown, Ray “Yoda” Murray, and Rico Wade became well known for their signature combination of funk, G-funk, soul, and Dirty South (see sidebar: The Dirty South). They have produced award-winning material for TLC, Goodie Mob, Xscape, En Vogue, Ludacris, and, of course, Outkast.

The Dirty South
T. Hasan Johnson

Hip hop in the southern region of the United States has its own distinct history. Most of the country learned about hip hop through word of mouth, random floating mixtapes from New York, or select media venues. Eventually, in the early 1980s, a slew of movies started coming out that helped disseminate hip hop culture. Films like Wild Style (1982), Flashdance (1983), Beat Street (1984), and Breakin’ (1984) delivered hip hop culture to the world in an unprecedented fashion. Television shows like Yo! MTV Raps (1988) and radio
stations like Los Angeles’s KDAY 93.5 FM further disseminated hip hop’s burgeoning culture. Consequently, each area of the country (eventually the world) developed its own brand of rap, complete with its own sounds, techniques, and styles.

During the 1980s, the South yielded only a few artists. For the most part, the recording industry was still warming up to hip hop in the eighties (particularly after the success of Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys, and LL Cool J), but the South was not part of their agenda. As most companies and consumers fixated on New York and California, the South was mostly ignored until, eventually, several groups struck gold. 2 Live Crew (1985), the Geto Boys (1990), and Arrested Development (1992) introduced the South’s first wave of successful artists to the hip hop world.

2 Live Crew’s newly developed Miami sound was bass heavy and rooted in the Miami club scene. The group received national attention for their raunchy lyrics, forcing the group’s lead rapper, Luther Campbell, to fight a series of court battles against federally sanctioned censorship. Conversely, the Geto Boys, from Houston, Texas, was the first southern group to receive widespread mainstream attention. 2 Live Crew’s issues with obscenity and censorship prevented them from securing mainstream accolades, but because of the Geto Boys’ emphasis on storytelling and their use of slower tempo, bass-heavy beats, the group could help bring the South international acclaim. Their signature song, “Mind Playing Tricks on Me,” not only brought attention to the group, it brought attention to southern hip hop. Arrested Development, a southern-based group with a positive message, introduced a southern form of Afrocentric consciousness while using both African and distinctly rural aesthetic elements, employing instrumentation specific to black southern soundscapes.

It was not long before other artists followed. Jermaine Dupri, Da Brat, and Kriss Kross were part of the second wave of significant artists to claim the South as a point of origin. Their sound was much more experimental, colorful, and club friendly. Compared to the Geto Boys’ brutal realism and 2 Live Crew’s rampant sexuality, these newer groups included a more youthful energy. The third wave, beginning in 1993, consisted of groups like Outkast, Goodie Mob, and the rest of the members of the Dungeon Family. These groups helped continue interest in southern hip hop, while openly engaging southern drawl and slang in a much more overt fashion than their predecessors. In fact, it was in the mid-1990s that mainstream audiences began to incorporate more southern slang into the popular consciousness. This wave, whose signature sound was defined by the production group Organized Noize, emphasized sampling, limited live instrumentation, and slower-tempo beats with intricately interwoven background sounds. They also merged pimp culture, gangsta rhetoric, and socially conscious themes in their music.

Toward the end of the 1990s, the fourth wave of southern hip hop artists began to attract wide-ranging attention. Led by artists like Ludacris and
Outkast was the first hip hop group signed to LaFace, and they made their debut on labelmate TLC’s remix of their hit single “Ain’t to Proud to Beg.” A year later, in 1993, Outkast released the first song from their first album, *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*, “Player’s Ball.” Although they were not the first hip hop group to release popular songs out of Atlanta, Outkast put Atlanta on the map with “Player’s Ball.” The success of this song signified a southern hip hop movement when it went gold before Outkast’s album was released. It should be noted, however, that it was somewhat risky to be so openly representative of their southern home. Because they openly identified key locations in Atlanta like College Park and East Point, these types of references could have easily alienated them from their national audience, then polarized by East and West Coast musical production camps. What is important about Outkast’s first submission to the music industry is that they broke from the binary production options split by California and New York artists. Thus, groups like Bone Thugs-N-Harmony (from Cleveland, Ohio), MC Breed (from Flint, Michigan), or Sir Mix-A-Lot (from Seattle, Washington), were, for the most part, all considered West Coast—although it could be argued that they each had very distinct sounds that were influenced by their respective cities of origin. But each used production teams and styles (and sampled funk groups) that were generally considered part of the West Coast gangsta sound, while Outkast used up-and-coming Atlanta-based production crews. This signaled a break from the conventional split between East and West hip hop aesthetics and openly demonstrated that the South could produce street-certified, quality music.

After “Player’s Ball,” Outkast released “Git Up, Git Out,” a collaborative effort with Goodie Mob, an intertextual track that mixed gangsta and consciousness themes. This soon came to be known as the dominant Outkast-Goodie Mob composition, mixing what many assumed to be East Coast elements (consciousness and political awareness) with West Coast elements (violence, drugs, sex, and gangsta culture); articulating them simultaneously with a distinctly southern cadence. The music on the first album, heavily influenced by R&B and funk musical traditions, provided a new vehicle for southern rap to claim its own place in the pantheon of artistic distinctness, but more importantly, it worked. *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* went platinum within a year of its release. Conversely, when receiving their award for Best New Rap Group at the Source Awards in 1995, they were booed when they took the stage. Although Big Boi managed to give his shout-outs, Dre was a bit...
nervous and only managed to squeak out a couple of choice words—but they were nonetheless prophetic: “The South got somethin’ to say.”

Their second album, ATLiens, was released in 1996, selling 1.5 million units, eventually going double platinum, and reaching number two on the U.S. album charts. The title is partly a statement about being from Atlanta, while also signifying on the theme of the group’s name (by using the term aliens), framing themselves as societal outcasts. The album garnered them critical acclaim because of their avant-garde subject matter and daring conceptual schemas that yielded them a wider audience with those listeners who believed hip hop music was stagnating in the wake of the East Coast–West Coast wars. Although Outkast still would suffer boos at concerts, their sales and overall support were rising exponentially. The title track, “ATLiens,” went to the top forty, whereas their second release, the single “Elevators (Me and You),” went gold and reached the top twenty.

Starting with the ATLiens album, Outkast found new ways to infuse a wider and wider variety of styles and sounds into their music. They also subverted expectations by going in a new artistic direction (rather than sticking to what worked for them on the first album with Organized Noize). Contradicting audience expectations, in the tradition of artists like Parliament/Funkadelic and Prince, are risky in the entertainment industry. In one sense, you have to find new and more daring ways to impress your audience while at the same time you avoid deviating from what people want to hear. Outkast boldly decided to push the boundaries of their audience’s palette and expand their fan base. On ATLiens, they decided to slightly reduce Organized Noize’s influence on their work by doing more of their own production through their production group Earthtone Ideas. Hence, although Organized Noize produced the majority of the album (ten out of fifteen tracks), the remaining Outkast-produced tracks were the ones to receive critical acclaim—namely “ATLiens” and “Elevators (Me and You),”

ATLiens also marked the moment when Outkast began to address more complex and eccentric subject matter. Ranging from pimps and hustlers to spaceships and higher consciousness, they amazed (and lost) some of their Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik audience, while garnering a larger following inside and outside of hip hop’s core group. Songs like “Babylon,” “Millennium,” and “E.T. (Extraterrestrial),” albeit less known than “Elevators (Me and You),” nevertheless pushed the boundaries of creative production and acceptable hip hop subject matter. Even their brilliant take on overused subjects in hip hop, like sex, was approached in a wholly different manner. In the song “Babylon,” Andre talks about a sexual attraction to a woman while describing his upbringing, religious attitudes toward sex, and most intriguingly, his reflections on how such influences may have been problematic. He argues for a more humanistic approach to the matter.

The sounds they used were eerie, spacey, abstract, and at times incomprehensible, and saw the album break convention (consider the Organized

In 1998, the group released its third album, *Aquemini*. The title was a mixture of both Andre and Big Boi’s astrological signs (Gemini and Aquarius, respectively), and the album reached platinum sales three weeks after its release, receiving five mics from *The Source* magazine. Needless to say, this creative collaboration broke from hip hop conventionality more than *ATLiens*, and like its predecessor, *Aquemini* also sold double platinum. They even spoofed their own work during some of the skits featured on the album. These skits featured gangstas who avoid buying an Outkast album because of their frequent change in personality (i.e., gangstas to aliens), but later return, unsatisfied with the typical gangsta album.

Nevertheless, *Aquemini* marked the degree to which Outkast would further march into unpredictable, uncharted aesthetic territory. In television appearances such as their 1998 performance on the *Chris Rock Show*, they visually challenged their audience by wearing more and more outlandish outfits, using live funk artists, and employing instruments that do not usually play a large role in hip hop. In the song “Rosa Parks,” the harmonica is fitting but exotic because it is rarely used in hip hop. It also illustrates their appreciation for their southern roots, but somewhat contradicts their appropriation of more rock-themed elements, like the guitar riffs on “Chonkyfire,” or the more laid-back guitar pickings in the title track, “Aquemini.” But the subject matter of this album, much like *ATLiens*, extends the boundaries of hip hop conventionality. On “Da Art of Storytellin’ (Part 1),” Andre tells the story of Sasha Thumper, an old friend that gets hooked into a self-destructive lifestyle and ends up dead from a drug overdose. It should be stated, however, that no description of the song’s story could convey the emotionalism of the song. This is significant, considering that hip hop has predominantly articulated itself as an androcentric, masculinist art form with few avenues for emotional expression outside of bemoaning dead homies or lost fathers. Andre, here, manages to walk the fine line between emotionalism and masculinity by articulating this highly emotional narrative with an almost emotionless tone. This strange contradiction in styles maintains his status as a man but allows the listener to experience the tragedy of the character’s outcome.

The most highly publicized issue with *Aquemini* was the litigation against Outkast by Rosa Parks. In 1999, Parks sued the group for the use of her name in the song “Rosa Parks.” Parks sued for defamation of character and trademark infringement (on her name), and opposed Outkast’s use of obscene language in the song. Dre and Big Boi insisted that the song was a tribute, and the initial suit was dismissed and then denied in 2001 on First Amendment grounds after Parks hired Johnnie Cochran to appeal. Eventually, in 2003, the Supreme Court allowed Parks’s lawsuit and in 2004, the Parks
family, after doubting the ethics of their legal representatives, asked the court to appoint some new, impartial representatives. Later, Outkast was dropped as codefendants while Parks’s camp pursued LaFace Records and parent company BMG. The case was settled in 2005 and Outkast agreed to work with the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute to promote Parks’s legacy, with no one having to admit any wrongdoing. But this incident provoked more than just concerns about disrespecting historical figures. This incident helped to highlight the generational differences between the civil rights and hip hop eras.

Partly due to the changing concerns of the times, especially in relation to African Americans who did not benefit from the advances of the black middle class’s integrationist political agenda, the civil rights movement focused on the burgeoning black middle class at the expense of the poor black communities they championed. As the black middle class improved its standing in society, the gap between the black affluent and the black poor only widened, and the later exploitation of the poor by state, federal, political, and corporate entities (on a then-unprecedented level) plagued the black community like never before. The dismantling of black labor unions, the lack of access to suitable job training, the reduction of job opportunities, the development of project housing in predominantly black neighborhoods, the displacement of low-income black communities in the interests of the more affluent, the heightened sentencing for crimes committed (statistically) by African Americans more than other racial groups (e.g., crack cocaine sales versus cocaine), the heavy reliance on nearly free black labor in the newly corporatized prison system, the widening technological gap between the black poor and societal elites, the depoliticization of the black church, the gentrification of urban black communities and disproportionate rates for real estate purchases by blacks versus other racial groups, the expansion of black entry into the military industry due to lack of career opportunities, and the use of misinformation to deny blacks access to voting polls all characterized post–civil rights America in the last thirty years of the twentieth century. These issues framed the sociopolitical context of many African Americans born in the 1960s and 1970s, and Parks’s misunderstanding of Outkast’s aesthetic expression only highlighted the differences between the generations.

Dre and Big Boi themselves were not the authors of many of the arguments ascribed to them; their lawyers wrote many of the statements issued in their defense. Nevertheless, the two members of Outkast became symbols for the frustrations that people felt across the black class generational divide. Parks represented the more conservative black Christian middle class, who looked at the black poor with disdain. Outkast, on the other hand, championed the poor, mainly from their lyrical identification with poverty, begrudging involvement in illegal activities, and ties with southern black culture—all common hip hop representations of African American cultural authenticity. This dichotomy not only polarized the poor and the middle class but also the old and the young, and highlighted the degree to which the elder community
misunderstood their progeny’s social plight (while the youth viewed their progenitors with disgust at their socioeconomic schizophrenia—ignoring the poor when they themselves had often grown up in such circumstances). Clearly, such generalizations oversimplify the issue, but they do nonetheless encapsulate how many perceived the lawsuit.

Therefore, predictably, many middle-aged listeners perceived Outkast’s tribute to Parks the same way they perceived Cedric the Entertainer’s statements about Parks in the 2002 film Barbershop. Cedric, playing the character Eddie, says that Parks “ain’t do nuthin’ but sit her black ass down; there was a whole lotta other people that sat down on the bus, and they did it way before Rosa did!” Soon, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson caught wind of the performance and pressured MGM to remove the scenes before the DVD was released in January 2003, but the film was released with the controversial scenes.

Strangely enough, Cedric’s statements were partially factual; some did try to protest Montgomery, Alabama’s, racist transportation policies before Parks. People like Claudette Colvin, the fifteen-year-old girl who refused to give up her seat and was arrested, or Irene Morgan, the twenty-seven-year-old who did it eleven years before Parks; or Jackie Robinson, the baseball legend. However, none of them had the symbolic caipitol necessary to rally the black community. Colvin was pregnant and unwed, and thus a potential symbol for black immorality. Morgan fought the police when arrested, which could have been used to argue that black people were inherently violent and quick-tempered, while Robinson was a wealthy star athlete and thus not seen as representative of African American laypeople. It was Parks who best personified the civil rights agenda: she was a woman, playing on patriarchal notions of female vulnerability, highlighting the viciousness of institutional racism by publicizing the arrest of an innocent, delicate woman (also suggesting that people would be less sympathetic to a black male protester). She was pretty and light-skinned, further garnering attention; she held a respectable position as a seamstress and was married to a barber, and was an active participant in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. These things helped cement her as a respectable member of black society, and further secured her position as a civil rights icon. Yet, most important, Parks was an activist who was quite active long before her publicized arrest.

Nevertheless, Outkast and later Cedric were ostracized for seemingly chastising such sacred cows as Parks, Jackson, and Sharpton. They were publicly protested by elite members of the civil rights generation but applauded by those in the hip hop generation. Although much more for Outkast than Cedric, hip hoppers argued that the older generation lacked an understanding of their generation’s concerns. This would not be the end of Outkast’s accusations of non-political correctness.

In 2000, Outkast released their fourth album, Stankonia, to rave reviews, and it sold quadruple platinum. The album launched the group more into the mainstream than any other project to date, and the group’s wildly diverse
style started to get people’s attention. Their influences ranged from funk, G-funk, rhythm and blues, and jazz, to electronica, jungle, and gospel-influenced choir traditions. Their new sound reminded people of the diversity of Jimi Hendrix, Bootsy Collins, and Prince, and they now found that they could do little, musically, that would not meet with fan praise.

The first song they released from the album was the highly energetic “B.O.B. (Bombs over Baghdad),” which ran like a freight train at 155 beats per minute and used the Morris Brown College Gospel Choir during its hook. The song shifts direction at several junctures, and its lyrical theme is somewhat easy to forget, but its aesthetic drive is irresistible (the group decided to use the Gulf War as an analogy for how mainstream artists function). Despite its title, the song was not a critique of the war in Iraq, but rather an analysis of mainstream music and the extent to which they felt that most artists do not complete their work. However, the song was banned from most urban Top 40 radio stations because of its title and assumed subject matter.

Andre, who developed a propensity for monikers (brandishing the name Andre 3000), began a relationship with Erykah Badu, and they eventually had a child they named Seven. When their relationship soured, Dre and Big Boi produced their next hit, “Ms. Jackson,” a timely production that coincided with Dre’s breakup with Badu. This led many fans to assume that the song was directed at Badu’s mother. However, both MCs seemed to be talking directly to their mothers-in-law. Big Boi told a story of an angry mother-in-law that sided with her daughter, despite the daughter’s unfair treatment of Boi at the dissolution of their relationship. Dre’s story focused on lamenting the end of the relationship and contended that what they shared was not “puppy love” as Ms. Jackson seems to imply, but that it was “grown.” The interesting thing about the song is the title, “Ms. Jackson.” It could have easily been “Mrs.,” but it seems that Outkast wanted to emphasize that the primary figure who won’t give them their due respect, the ex-girlfriend’s mother, despite her judgment of their relationship, has not seemed to maintain a relationship herself. Did her husband die? Was she never married? Is she currently in a relationship? Although they never clarify what may have happened to her, it is clear that she casts judgment on both of them despite her own solitary relationship status. Nevertheless, the song has become a sort of anthem for black men that have tried to maintain relationships with their kids after divorce.

The final single released from the album was the Organized Noize-produced release “So Fresh, So Clean” with Sleepy Brown. The song helped lead Outkast to two 2001 Grammy Awards, one for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group (for “Ms. Jackson”), and another for Best Rap Album for Stankonia. In 2001, the group released a CD of their greatest hits, Big Boi and Dre Present . . . Outkast. Alongside a list of their most accomplished creations, they added three new songs, one of which, “The Whole World,” led to a 2002 Grammy Award for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group.
In 2003, the group would experience success on an unparalleled scale. Upon the release of their album *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, Outkast claimed a mainstream audience and sold an astonishing ten times platinum standing (10,000,000 units sold); going diamond and winning the Grammy Award for Album of the Year in 2004. This put the group on par with other diamond-selling artists like Prince, Lionel Richie, Boyz II Men, TLC, Phil Collins, 'N Sync, and Whitney Houston. MC Hammer and Notorious B.I.G. are the only other hip hop artists to claim such an achievement. This accomplishment was partly due to the brilliance of releasing a two-CD set (because each unit counted as two sales), thus meaning that 5 million actually sold, but they were credited with 10 million sales. Moreover, they were able to maintain much of their southern fan base as well, something not guaranteed when succeeding in the mainstream. Between Andre’s eclectic expression and Big Boi’s southern gangstaism, the group managed to keep one foot in the underground and one in the mainstream. Despite the duplicitous and problematic nature of underground and mainstream binaries in the music entertainment industry (a subject addressed in the introduction of this book), Outkast’s navigation of both terrains has been exemplary.

*Speakerboxxx/The Love Below,* like much of Outkast’s work, has continued to break conventional standards. The album was released as a double CD, one by Big Boi (*Speakerboxxx*) and one by Dre (*The Love Below*). *Speakerboxxx,* albeit bearing no creative surprises, was nonetheless a productive success. Reportedly, Big Boi made the album in about a month. He included Dre in much of the production but also included Jazze Pha, Jay-Z, Killer Mike, Goodie Mob, Ludacris, and Sleepy Brown. Dre, on the other hand, only included a select few others like Farnsworth Bentley, Rosario Dawson, Norah Jones, and Kelis, and only had Big Boi on one track, “Roses.” Also, the album took considerably longer than Big Boi’s, taking approximately two years to finish, and was only completed two weeks before the release date. Having very little rapping on the CD, Dre’s *The Love Below* represented a break with hip hop standards (like rhyming, rapping, and the use of DJs) and included more of Dre singing, something prequled by Dre’s performance on the Grammy Award-winning “The Whole World” from their greatest hits album.

The album covers were also quite telling, as Big Boi’s was somewhat of a tribute to Huey Newton’s classic Black Panther picture, with Big Boi sitting in a wicker chair in a fur coat. Although not brandishing a rifle and looking menacing, he nonetheless made a general reference, while Dre wears sunglasses and a hat while holding a purple gun with purple smoke trailing out of the muzzle. Not surprisingly, Dre’s use of purple, and his album’s use of funk, inspired comparisons between him and Prince. Moreover, Dre’s fearlessness and schizophrenic style of creative production also reminded audiences of Prince.

Dre’s release “Hey Ya!” charted in twenty-eight countries and was eventually replaced on the U.S. charts by “The Way You Move,” Big Boi’s first
single, which charted in seventeen countries (one song replacing another song from the same group on the charts had not occurred since the Beatles did it in 1964). “Roses” was the third single released from the album, followed by “Prototype” and “Ghetto Musick,” securing their standing as the new kings of hip hop. They not only set a new standard for hip hop artists in mainstream circles (Nelly would release a double album in 2004 titled Sweat/Suit in an effort to capitalize on Outkast’s success), but they did so with an unapologetic appreciation for their southern roots—a feat replicated by few other artists. Despite jeers that they were soon to separate, something addressed by Big Boi on Speakerboxxx, they managed to stay together despite their success, something not accomplished by hip hop duos and trios like EPMD, A Tribe Called Quest, and Eric B. & Rakim.

The success of Dre and Big Boi’s music careers has also allowed for an unsurprising venture into acting, with both producing interesting performances, albeit in completely separate vehicles. Big Boi appeared on Chappelle’s Show in 2004 (he performed and acted in a comedy sketch), egging on Dave Chappelle when he attempted to get Big Boi to hang out with him. He also played a neighborhood drug dealer in the 2006 film ATL with the rapper T.I. Dre appeared in the 2003 movie Hollywood Homicide with Harrison Ford and Josh Hartnett, playing an old friend of Hartnett’s from high school. He later starred in the 2005 film Four Brothers with Mark Wahlberg, Tyrese Gibson, and Garrett Hedlund. Impressing many with their performances, both artists have already made Outkast’s next performance, the 2006 period piece Idlewild, a potential success. Idlewild is an HBO-financed movie with Outkast’s soundtrack of the same name released in August 2006.

THE AQUEMINI MILLENNIUM: (RE)MAKING SOUTHERN HIP HOP

Hip hop developed out of New York and spread throughout the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Songs from Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel, and Run-DMC helped extend hip hop’s reach outside of New York. Films like Flashdance, Beat Street, and Breakin’ helped illustrate how break dancing, rapping, and even graffiti art were connected (even if they initially weren’t). This provided a sort of generic, loose-fitting blueprint for practicing hip hop that others could take and embellish to suit their tastes and interests. As with most parts of the country, and eventually outside of it, the South was no different. The South hit the national scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s with groups like the Geto Boys (from Houston, Texas), UGK (from Port Arthur, Texas), 8 Ball and MJG (from Memphis, Tennessee), and Raheem the Dream (from Houston, Texas).

Aesthetically, the East Coast was characterized by reliance on scratching, sampling, and the drum machine, while the South (and the West Coast) became more known for synthesizer melodies, replaying familiar sounds (as opposed to
sampling), limited live instrumentation, and eventually gangsta subject matter. Outkast took it one step further. They managed to become the preeminent sound of the South in many mainstream circles, helping the rest of the hip hop world appreciate the experiences and issues pertinent to the southern experience. Also, they also gave listeners a framework for appreciating southern hip hop outside of underground hip hop circles. For other groups interested in getting into the entertainment industry, Outkast made being southern a benefit rather than a handicap, and therefore laid the groundwork for southern drawl, southern terminology, dances, and culture in general. Dances like the bankhead bounce, drinks like sizzurp (a drink that mixes prescription promethazine cough syrup with vodka or rum, and either Now and Later or Jolly Rancher candy), Freaknik (a popular Atlanta-based annual event that promoted partying, drinking, and dancing during the college spring break schedule), bling (expensive jewelry popularized by Louisiana-based rappers Birdman, B.G. [Baby Gangsta’s], Lil Wayne, and Juvenile in 1999), and getting crunk (a term that many suggest means to be both crazy and drunk, or high on marijuana and alcohol simultaneously; although not invented by Outkast, the term was used on their 1993 album *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*) have all become part of the southern mythos. People have come to perceive the South through these terms, and for many, Outkast has been one of the major groups responsible for the South’s acceptance in hip hop (see sidebars: Bling-Bling and Crunk).

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**Bling-bling**

*Nicole Hodges Persley*

The hip hop vernacular expression *bling-bling* was originally used in the early 1990s to refer to expensive jewelry encrusted with diamonds in gold or platinum settings. Something encrusted with diamonds may be described as “blingy” or “blingin’.” To have bling is to own either jewelry or something that is high priced. To be blingin’ is to possess something such as a Bentley Mabach or a Rolex Presidential watch. The saying was later extended to include anything from twenty-inch car rims to a forty-foot yacht in St. Tropez. Bling-bling has its origins in the rap culture of Louisiana with the Cash Money Millionaire family, specifically with Baby Gangsta’s song “Bling-Bling.”

When pronounced, the phrase is supposed to imitate the sound of the gleam coming from high-quality diamonds when the light hits them. The sound effect, like a small bell ringing, is often used in cartoons when diamonds are shown in treasure chests. In songs such as Will Smith’s “Everything That Glitters (Ain’t Always Gold)” and Lil’ Kim’s “Chinatown,” bling-bling is presented as a status symbol. In the UK, British performance artist Ali G has used satire to mock the bling-bling culture of hip hop by creating a white hip hop character who uses it to construct his gangsta persona. Today, the term translates around the globe in hip hop settings as indicating a lavish and expensive lifestyle that spares no expense.
Although the South introduced the bling-bling phenomenon and participated in rap’s overemphasis on materialism and street culture, Outkast and other southern rappers helped introduce a sort of down-to-earth, pragmatic wisdom reminiscent of black southern culture. In their earlier albums (at least up to *ATLiens*), the group often talked about how little money they had, rather than celebrating how many cars and necklaces they could buy. This theme is characterized best by one of Dre’s verses on the song “Elevators” on the *ATLiens* album, where he states, “I live by the beat like you live check to check,” and suggests that even with Outkast’s growing number of fans, he feels continuing pressure to produce music that sells so that he can survive. At the time of the song’s release, Dre’s statement ran counter to what rappers like B.G. rhymed about, and counter to the “Mo Money Mo Problems” mentality promoted by Bad Boy Records in New York. Even in the midst of the positive hip hop era of the late 1980s and early 1990s, rappers still bragged about their success and material fortune. Gangsta rappers even rhymed about their material wealth, mostly due to illegal activity, and at most mentioned poverty in terms of what they had pulled themselves out of. But Outkast openly talked about how much money they did not have. They also brought the issue of how artists are treated by the entertainment industry to light by voicing their financial woes. Big Boi, in the song “Ms. Jackson” on the *Stankonia* album, reveals “Private school, daycare, shit medical bills, I pay that.” Although he does not state that these payments are a burden to him, to mention them in such detail, especially when outlining his dedication to caring for his kids, when other rappers talk about Bentleys and bling, is telling. It suggests that finances are not as abundant as most think, and that financial obligations such as these require effort, something that bling and gangsta rappers overlook when talking about their wealth.
FUNKIN’ AROUND THE WHOLE WORLD: AFROFUTURISM AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUTKAST

Having reached diamond-level album sales, it is clear that Outkast has achieved mainstream success. Even though they are quite eclectic, Outkast’s production quality, lyricism, charisma, and thematic style of dress (which changes with each album) has remained consistent. Outkast has grown in each of these areas with each album, reaching more and more toward a type of eclecticism rare for a hip hop duo; but each addition to their portfolio has remained a top-tier production. Although ATLiens was groundbreaking in its scope and content in relation to their first album, the group’s creative ingenuity did not reach epic proportions, or at least international attention, until their 2003 album Speakerboxxx/The Love Below. Nevertheless, their third album, Aquemini, was a dramatic break from ATLiens, and Stankonia a break from Aquemini. Even their greatest hits album, Big Boi and Dre Present

Crunk

Katherine V. Tsiopos-Wills

Crunk is a hip hop slang term and subgenre that arose in the early 1990s in the Dirty South. The invention of the word crunk has been credited to at least two sources. In 1993, NBC’s Late Night with Conan O’Brien urged its guests to replace profanities with “krunk,” a new dirty word to confuse the network censors. That same year, Dirty South rappers Outkast used the term in their single “Player’s Ball.” The term itself means frenetic or excited, with MCs often urging the crowd to “get crunk”; Lil Jon and the Eastside Boyz and Lil Flip both have songs called “Get Crunk.” In this popular usage, crunk is thought to be a combination of the words crazy and drunk. However, another Dirty South artist, DJ Paul of Three 6 Mafia, reports that crunk originated as a Memphis slang term that meant crowded (Cobb).

While crunk originated in Memphis, Atlanta’s Lil Jon (aka the King of Crunk) popularized crunk as a slang term, a sound, and a brand. He marketed his own energy drink, Crunk Juice, and produced hit songs like Usher’s “Yeah” and Ciara’s “Goodies,” which extended crunk to the worlds of R&B and pop music. Lil Jon is known for pioneering the sound known as crunk, which is built from the Roland TR-808 drum machine and synthesized sound effects and designed for dance clubs. Lil Jon’s vocal style of shouting his rhymes as well as the words “yeah” and “okay” throughout his songs was parodied by Dave Chappelle on Comedy Central’s Chappelle’s Show.

Works Cited


FUNKIN’ AROUND THE WHOLE WORLD: AFROFUTURISM AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUTKAST

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... Outkast, broke from convention and provided new songs and new thematic elements to their mystique.

As Big Boi and Dre consistently reinvent their music, they have demonstrated a capacity to push beyond the boundaries of their own genres. On their first album, they talked about Southern California gangsta rap themes such as driving Cadillacs, smoking marijuana, and being players, as heard in the music of Outkast’s contemporaries Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg. However, if Outkast ever were part of gangsta rap, they quickly expanded out of that genre. Whether it is their approach to social issues like systemic black male underdevelopment (e.g., “Git Up, Git Out”), or the outright break from convention with ATLiens (the former being more subtle and the latter being an undisputedly different approach), Outkast has managed to do what only a few other artists have been able to: shed their audience.

Jimi Hendrix, Parliament/Funkadelic, and Prince are all artists that have made music that threatened to lose their audience base. Although it may seem an easy strategy, each artistic break with fan expectation, something the music industry usually frowns on, was a major risk. Hence, there was no guarantee that Prince’s Paisley Park album would be accepted after having a smash hit with Purple Rain. Similarly, Outkast’s shift from Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik’s aesthetic to the unsure ground of ATLiens’ out-of-this-world point of view was a huge risk. However, as with Prince, they managed to develop an audience that followed them through each artistic change. More important, they have created an aesthetic space that allows them to do whatever they want and still have music and film executives clamoring for them. Few artists manage to find this kind of artistic power. Many artists who have the courage to break from fan expectations have failed to stimulate interest in their new endeavor. For many, shifting styles is career suicide. Yet for those that continue to sell albums, their newfound artistic freedom is a hard-earned badge of honor. Outkast has, without question, achieved this status.

Outkast has managed to keep their music ahead of the curve, anticipating the industry’s shifting interests. Although it should be stated that they do not seem to follow the dominant trends, they do, however, manage to consistently shift their aesthetic focus, making it difficult to label their music. Clearly they are generally considered a hip hop group, despite that many are having an increasingly difficult time categorizing their sound. Dre only rapped in two instances on The Love Below, spending most of his time singing and verbalizing poetry. Yet this development could have been predicted if one listened to Dre in the song “Funkin’ Around” on Big Boi and Dre Present... Outkast (2001): “I’m out here knowin’ hip hop is dead.” Dre was becoming more and more disillusioned by the boundaries of what hip hop artists were supposed to produce as artists.

This leads to the fourth reason for Outkast’s success—artistic fearlessness. Considering that Outkast has been critical of the extent to which hip hop has
been hijacked by corporate interests, their desire to remain hip hop artists is exemplary. More to the point, they have been unswerving in their desire to expand, artistically, as hip hop artists. Thus, they have mixed Dirty South, Miami bass, electronica, soul, funk, P-Funk, G-funk, and rock to fuse together the Outkast portfolio.

The fifth reason for their success has been their approach to blackness. As southern rappers, their upbringing and point of origin refers, in many people’s imagination, to a long-standing tradition of African American blackness. This blackness stems from the experience of enslavement, lynching, sharecropping, voting rights activism, civil rights, and state-sanctioned terrorism (e.g., Klan activity, lynching, police brutality, and antivoting violence against black people). Hence, the blackness and black southern culture that Benjamin and Patton grew up in is generally considered as the standard type of blackness within African Americana. However, although they represent such blackness, they have also come to symbolize a kind of intraracial diversity. In other words, they have championed a less rigid approach to blackness, one that embraces the more subtle and diverse trends of blackness.

Although much of this is articulated through Benjamin’s eccentric persona, one can extrapolate that Benjamin’s listeners often embody some of the characteristics of black America that the civil rights generation has been most uncomfortable with. Black homosexuals, nontraditional spiritualists, science fiction buffs, comic book readers, and those interested in a more self-reflexive type of hip hop tend to appreciate Outkast’s work. Yet it is this dichotomy between Big Boi and Andre that leads us to the sixth, and probably most important, reason for their success.

Outkast’s two personas, embodied by Big Boi and Andre, are the hustler and the visionary respectively. Superficially, Big Boi has become synonymous with hustling and maintaining multiple relationships with women. Andre, on the other hand, is perceived as more abstract and artistically driven. He experiments with mixing alternative musical styles, fashion, and subject matter in a manner that is inconsistent with other MCs in hip hop. Although they have both delved into each other’s socially perceived personas, they are more consistently referred to in this manner.

The duo’s dichotomous style is the group’s most alluring and signature characteristic. Big Boi’s persona grounds the group in southern hip hop culture. It could be argued that he is the primary reason that the group’s early following, mostly underground hip hoppers in the southern (especially Atlanta) hip hop scene (see sidebar: The Dirty South), still salute Outkast as a southern group, even after Andre’s expansive artistic growth since the ATLiens album. To be succinct, Big Boi grounds Andre’s eclectic eccentricity, while Andre prevents the group from becoming a stereotype of southern-born, gangsta-oriented rappers, complete with gold teeth, southern drawls, and Cadillacs. The combination of the two creates a new blend of the old and the new, the contemporary and the alternative, the homegrown and the far away.
Also, most notably on *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*, the group successfully cross-pollinates different audience groups. Since that album, the group has expanded the listening palette of their initial fan base. They’ve expanded what their hip hop audience listens to and what they might consider hip hop, as now the hardest listener can enjoy Dre’s “Pink and Blue” or “Roses.” The group has also garnered new fans not normally considered hip hop listeners. For these listeners, having to purchase a double CD of Outkast’s music was a brilliant move on the group’s part. Many of them who never would have listened to southern hip hop (or any hip hop at all) are now being introduced to it (raising the interest in other southern MCs). For example, mainstreamers that only purchased *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* for songs like “Hey Ya” or “Prototype” are formally introduced to Big Boi’s “The Way You Move,” “Tomb of the Boom,” or “Flip Flop Rock” (all of which were critically acclaimed, but due to radio programming were not considered to have as much crossover appeal as most of Andre’s *The Love Below*). Nevertheless, the brilliance of the group’s dynamic is in their collaborative, highly creative approach to redefining hip hop’s aesthetic boundaries, expanding their fan base, and, no doubt, their Soundscan sales ratings.

**EXTRATERRESTRIALS AND CADILLACMUZIK: CATEGORIZING A PHENOMENON**

Aside from their dichotomous structure, another quality Outkast possesses is what one might call an Afrofuturist impulse or aesthetic. Afrofuturism, albeit difficult to succinctly and wholly define, generally refers to an intersection between African diaspora culture, imagination, science fiction, technology, and notions of the future in an attempt to reevaluate harmful socially constructed practices like white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and highly exploitive forms of capitalism (i.e., economic policy). Groups and individuals that follow this logic are generally difficult to categorize, as they usually have an aversion to socially constructed categorizations.

Musicians such as Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Parliament/Funkadelic (who now tour as the P-Funk All Stars), Bootsy Collins, Prince, Afrika Bambaataa, Digital Underground, Digable Planets, Me’shell NdegeOcello, Tricky, MF DOOM, and Outkast fall within this category. One of the preeminent characteristics of people in this category is the need for artistic freedom. Whether in business or artistic production, Afrofuturist artists usually help to create new and interesting ways to negotiate the boundaries of business and art. Sun Ra was one of the first jazz musicians to set up an independent label in the 1950s, while also employing electric keyboards, polyrhythms, and group improvisational free-form styles of music (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Funk).

Clinton, among other things, blazed a trail from doo-wop to funk, influencing several generations of artists and discovering a wide variety of black
Many of the most popular musicians in hip hop cite funk as one of their primary inspirations. Funk music originates from West African musical traditions, African American spirituals, blues, work chants, and praise songs. Throughout its development, funk has been further influenced by jazz, R&B, and soul. Groups like James Brown, the Meters, the Isley Brothers, Bootsy Collins, and Sly and the Family Stone helped define the scope of funk music, serving to influence generations of musicians.

Some artists chose to embellish on funk’s jazz influences and develop a more big band sound while others chose to mix funk with the contemporary R&B of the late 1970s and 1980s. Relying on live instrumentation and large horn and percussion sections, artists like George Clinton (and his groups Parliament/Funkadelic), Bootsy and his Rubber Band, the Commodores, Tower of Power, the Ohio Players, Confunkshun, Earth, Wind and Fire, War, and Lakeside helped redefine funk and take it in a more aggressive direction. Developing a more driving, experimental sound, groups like Jimi Hendrix and the Experience and George Clinton found new ways to experiment, often being cited as the originators of otherworldly-sounding guitar riffs and technologically driven synthesizers.

In the early 1980s, artists like Prince, Kool and the Gang, and Zapp took the use of computerized instrumentation even further, especially Roger Troutman and Zapp (popularizing the use of the vocoder talkbox), intersecting Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, and other funk musicians in the process. Starting in the late 1980s and 1990s, hip hop artists in the West and the South (and even the East Coast) developed the early stages of G-funk. Influenced by Clinton and Troutman, superproducers like Dr. Dre and Easy Moe Bee (producer of Notorious B.I.G.’s first album, Ready to Die) and groups like N.W.A., Tha Dogg Pound, Funkdoobiest, and DJ Quik developed the sample-based style of music that paid tribute to the funkateers of the 1970s. Eventually, after several landmark lawsuits against hip hop producers in the early 1990s, many G-funk artists moved to a more simplistic, minimalist approach to funk that strayed from sampling to limited live instrumentation. Currently, funk, as it is already an amalgamation, has been further mixed with newer and most diverse styles, becoming more and more a part of today’s musical landscape. However, the legacy of funk music lives on through those that are attentive to its lineage and interested in carrying it on within new and emerging genres.
names in an effort to secure an almost independent status as an artist. Prince and MF DOOM, two artists that both had very difficult times maintaining some semblance of independence from the recording industry (although Prince’s experience was far more public and dramatic), may have taken their cues from Clinton.

Afrika Bambaataa was one of hip hop’s earliest visionaries, creating the preeminent hip hop organization, the Zulu Nation, to help frame hip hop as an international, interracial, and intercultural phenomenon. “Bam,” as many affectionately call him, helped transform hip hop into a social force for the uplifting of poor, destitute communities. His influence helped youth in various communities to perceive connections between their socioeconomic status and that of other communities in similar conditions around the world. He has also led a series of discourses with other artists about how to pressure the entertainment industry into better supporting its artists.

Last, Me’shell NdegeOcello has been an ardent spokesperson for racial, gender, and sexual antidiscrimination practices in society, while challenging the music industry’s approach to musical classification. Arguing against the racial categorization of music, especially her own, she has vehemently argued against the practice of classifying black music as either hip hop or R&B, while white musicians are generally termed rock artists.

Each of these artists has fought categorization in one form or another, and their approach to business, politics, and music has transcended similar boundaries. Interestingly enough, Outkast has benefited from the work of many such artists, especially those listed above. They have developed a reputation for the same type of originality that Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Bootsy Collins exude (and incorporated soul, funk, electronica, jazz, and rock music aesthetics into their brand of hip hop). Like Bambaataa and Clinton, Outkast supports new artists, particularly through Big Boi’s record company the Purple Ribbon All Stars (formerly Aquemini Records). They have signed Bubba Sparxxx, Killer Mike, and Sleepy Brown to date, but will no doubt expand their repertoire. Also, they have fought not to be characterized as typical rappers, but as artists—a moniker that many MCs are not given by mainstream artists.

Last, Outkast has sought to maintain a sense of artistic freedom, reminiscent of the artists previously mentioned, which helps pave the way for other artists interested in breaking from convention. Hence, aside from Outkast’s musical creativity, they have also been quite innovative in how they have conceptualized album infrastructure and coherence. In the age of digital music, one of the most significant changes has been how artists have had to conceptualize what an album means, what it does, and how it functions. Is it a cohesive collage? Is it a collection of freestanding individual songs? Although it can be argued that this development began more abstractly with CDs, it wasn’t until MP3 technology that the ease of transferring music began to notably impact people’s attitudes toward thematically integrated albums. Thus, Outkast’s albums have been thematic, integrated, and yet wholly comprehensible to those who have
only downloaded a few of their songs. Structuring their albums thusly has helped with their ability to cross over into more mainstream media networks. Although few artists seem to acknowledge the importance of structuring their albums to suit new means of file transfer (in fact, many oppose the use of it in such ways), Outkast has engaged it head-on, bolstering their sales and fan notoriety at the same time (and securing their status as Afrofuturists in that they acknowledge the importance of intersecting issues of blackness, southernness, technology, science fiction, and the imagination).

Another way they have managed to advance to the mainstream has been to do what older hip hop groups like Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys, and LL Cool J have done, using rock aesthetics and alternative instrumentation in their production repertoire. Songs like “Chonkyfire” on the Aquemini album and “Bombs over Baghdad (B.O.B.)” on their Stankonia album illustrate the band’s artistic fluidity and reaffirm their standing as one of hip hop’s greatest duos.

TWO DOPE BOYZ IN A CADILLAC: DEFINING OUTKAST’S INFLUENCES

The July 2006 issue of Vibe magazine asks this question on the cover: “Outkast: Are They Hip-Hop’s Greatest Group?” Partly due to popularity and partly due to longevity, the group has been touted by media moguls, music video shows, critics, and listeners as potentially the best group ever. Outkast is an underground group that has managed to maintain its creative sensibilities in a highly visible mainstream context. Big Boi and Dre have managed not to change their style in relation to what is considered mainstream, but rather they seem to adjust their style in accordance with their own artistic voice. When compared to their hip hop forerunners, Outkast become part of a tradition and at the same time create a distinct style within this lineage.

For hip hop groups that have at least two lead rappers that share rhyming responsibilities, there are at least four categories: foundational groups, rapper-producer groups, unbalanced groups, and balanced groups. Foundational groups are those that laid the foundation for how hip hop groups are defined. These groups, although not easily classified, set a standard for all hip hop groups that came after them. In many ways, each of the categories used here apply to the foundational groups. Groups like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force, and the Treacherous Three fall into this category. They are generally flamboyant, lyrically experimental, and musically groundbreaking (often mixing styles of music in new ways). Bambaataa, as with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, began with the DJ. Both groups were initially created to highlight the DJ and explain to the audience what the DJ does. They were flashy and usually wore loud colors and the kind of outlandish outfits consistent with the end of the disco era. Although there was a front man on lead vocals (usually the most charismatic in the
group), these groups sang and rapped in four- or five-part harmonies. They sang short hooks for songs, had dance routines, and often rhymed in a syncopated fashion. It was only later that rappers like Melle Mel transitioned more to the front of the stage and became headliners—as opposed to the DJ.

Outkast may have inherited some of their outlandish styles of dress from these earlier groups. The group’s occasional use of music to brandish their self-styled social, moral, and spiritual commentary (e.g., “Git Up, Git Out”) might owe its origins to Melle Mel more than anyone else. Mel was one of the first hip hop artists to create a popularly known song that provided a socio-political critique and a moral lesson, “The Message.” Although Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks” came out a few years earlier, Mel’s onstage persona came out of a group context, while Blow was always a solo artist. Later groups like Run-DMC and Boogie Down Productions no doubt further influenced Dre and Big Boi’s perceptions of what rap groups could do with a record, moving beyond regional materialism to international morality.

The second category, the rapper-producer dynamic, refers to artists that were technically members of a group but were the sole rappers to represent the group on the mic. Groups like Boogie Down Productions, Eric B. & Rakim, Gang Starr, and Pete Rock & CL Smooth provided burgeoning MCs with a strong appreciation for the producer. Taking the former role of the early 1980s DJ, the producers of the 1990s became central to hip hop (especially considering that since the late 1970s and early 1980s the DJ was the producer). Producers like Eric B., DJ Premier, Pete Rock, Dr. Dre, P. Diddy, and DJ Muggs became prominent albeit silent figures that earned respect due to their producing savvy (although Pete Rock would later release songs in which he rapped, and P. Diddy was seldom silent). Clearly, Outkast does not fit into this category, but their seamless relationship with Organized Noize may illustrate their appreciation for this legacy in hip hop.

The third category, unbalanced groups, refers to groups that had a front man and a less noticed lyrical partner. Groups like X-Clan (with lead rapper Brother J and partner Professor X), Public Enemy (with Chuck D and Flavor Flav), Cypress Hill (with lead rapper Be Real and partner Sen Dog), Funkdoobiest (with lead rapper Son Doobie and partner Tomahawk Funk), and the Group Home (with L’il Dap and partner Melachi the Nutcracker) defined these types of groups.

Brother J of X-Clan introduced a new Afrocentric consciousness in hip hop, while his partner Professor X ad-libbed with his distinct brand of esoteric observation. Chuck D provided scathing political and cultural critiques of society, while his partner Flavor Flav served as the hype man and comic relief to woo listeners who were not drawn to Chuck’s political perspective. One of the Gang Starr Foundation’s groups, the Group Home, was a duo started by superproducer DJ Premier and the Guru. L’il Dap, the lead rapper, was a breakout success with a cohesive rhyme style and a signature lisp, but Melachi was still in development, and probably started his professional career before he was
ready. Cypress Hill, with superproducer DJ Muggs, featured the high-pitched, nasal stylings of Be Real, while Sen Dog’s lyrics usually punctuated the themes of the songs—albeit far less intricate than Be Real’s. Similar to Cypress Hill, the lyrical ability of Funkdoobiest’s lead rapper Son Doobie far outshone his band mates. These groups, therefore, offer an unbalanced partnership that left the majority of the creative responsibility on the lead performer, while the other provided thematic support. Unfortunately, this arrangement often led fans to describe the group as a solo act, forgetting the other members.

However, Outkast is most specifically centered in the final category, balanced groups. These groups, as opposed to the last category, are more evenly keeled. Groups like A Tribe Called Quest, Brand Nubian, the Jungle Brothers, the Fugees (although fan appreciation for Pras and Wyclef took some time at the onset of their careers), EPMD, Binary Star, De La Soul, Das EFX, and Black Star all had at least a pair of MCs whose skills both rivaled and complimented one another. Q-Tip and Phife of Tribe, Erick and Parrish of EPMD, OneManArmy and Senim Silla of Binary Star, Posdnous and Trugoy the Dove of De La Soul, Mos Def and Talib Kweli of Black Star, and Books and Krazy Drazy of Das EFX all exemplify duos that have managed to equally balance each other. It should be noted that duos whose rhyme styles are similar to each other, like Das EFX or Binary Star, make it difficult to distinguish one artist from the other; but their styles usually produce a harmonious blend that their audiences don’t mind. Adversely, groups with two artists with distinctly different rhyme styles, cadences, and signature voices tend to attract a lot of attention as well. Groups like A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, EPMD, Wu-Tang Clan, or Black Star all have members that have different styles; hence, each of these rappers tend to amass their own cult followings who like them for very specific reasons.

Outkast falls into this last category. Both Dre and Big Boi have noticeably different styles, but manage to consistently complement one another, much to the pleasure of their fan base. Their subject interests and musical references differ, and yet instead of conflicting, one provides the creative vision while the other provides the anchor. However, when asking who the best hip hop group in the world may be, taking past groups into account complicates the question to such a degree that the question may not be answerable. Recently, questions have begun to arise as to whether Dre and Big Boi’s differences have finally pushed them too far apart to continue to work together.

AN END TO THE PLAYER’S BALL? OUTKAST’S IMPACT, LEGACY, AND RUMORS OF AN IMPENDING BREAKUP

Outkast’s influence and impact on hip hop, and on music in general, has been tremendous. Yet, despite their film and album *Idlewild* (2006), rumors have begun to surface about their interaction. Although there is little evidence that
the duo argues, they have, according to rumor, not been in the studio at the same time when producing tracks. It has been suggested that they did not tour after the Speakerboxxx/The Love Below album’s release because Dre decided the stress of performing material that he had outgrown was too great. Big Boi, on the other hand, was more concerned about how much money they would lose if they did not tour. So, Big Boi went on tour without Dre, and the two have not discussed it since. However, in the recording of Idlewild and a new Outkast album tentatively titled The Hard 10, the two are seldom in the studio at the same time. In 2006 television appearances to promote Idlewild, Big Boi and Dre agreed not to perform onstage together. Dre sits out the performances but does participate in interviews.

One question that many Outkast fans have is whether or not the group will follow the Wu-Tang Clan model or completely break from one another altogether. This model refers to the practice of some groups who continue to function as a group while fostering solo careers. Unlike groups who break up, go solo, and come back together again later (like EPMD), these groups function as individual artists and groups simultaneously from the onset of their professional careers. Wu-Tang Clan artists Method Man, U-God, Ghostface Killah, Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Raekwon, Masta Killa, Inspectah Deck, RZA, and GZA all remained part of the group while simultaneously developing their solo careers, independent merchandising, and publishing rights; more important, acclimating their audiences to their onstage personas so that when they released solo projects they would be recognized.

Currently, both Dre and Big Boi have engaged in solo projects while claiming to remain a group. Dre’s film career has taken off, while Big Boi’s film career is just getting started. Although Dre is active musically, it is Big Boi’s new project, the Purple Ribbon All Stars, that has recently released an album with the hit song “Kryptonite.” Yet, amid further rumors, it seems that the question of a conclusive split might be worth pondering. Nevertheless, the group insists that it is not splitting up, and both artists have commented on their frustration with such rumors.

Discussions about Outkast’s potential breakup tend to obscure all their achievements and accomplishments by focusing on what looks like two different agendas within the group. Yet Outkast was founded on such independence. Aside from raising the bar on what hip hop artists can achieve in musical, business, and artistic freedom, the group has established a new standard for remaining creatively independent. Today’s highly corporatized entertainment industry tends to look past individual expression to seek those artists who best fit into current trends, and many artists have not figured out how to (or do not have the power to) determine their own creative direction. This has never been a problem for Outkast, and their latest strategy seems to be to allow each other that same kind of room for self-expression.

Earlier artists like George Clinton and Parliament/Funkadelic may have laid the groundwork for artistic freedom, but many of today’s artists tend to view
them as a product of a different age—and to some extent they’re right. But what most people overlook is that when these artists were paying their dues, there was no guarantee that their careers would survive the ordeal. In other words, their wisdom is a product of hard-earned experience and should not be dismissed. Outkast has already gone through similar experiences, setting new standards for artistic independence for today’s artists in hip hop and alternative music. Outkast’s intersection of southern rap, funk, and alternative musical genres is as groundbreaking today as George Clinton’s experiments with funk in the 1970s, or Prince’s approach to combining Minneapolis-based, black alternative rock with R&B and soul music in the 1980s. In this light, Outkast should be perceived as a groundbreaking pioneer group that reinvented the South in many people’s minds, dared to take hip hop to new creative levels, and reminded people that the outlandish and absurd can still be funky thirty-six years after the landing of the Parliament/Funkadelic mother ship.

See also: The Geto Boys, Native Tongues

WORKS CITED


FURTHER READINGS

Born October 17, 1972, Eminem rhymed his way onto the hip hop scene in the 1990s with lyrical innovations and multiplatinum sales, securing his place as an icon of hip hop. As hip hop’s first new white superstar since Vanilla Ice was exposed for lying about his upbringing and criminal background, Eminem regained respect for white rappers by showing an understanding of hip hop traditions and keeping his lyrics true to his own experiences.

Eminem was born in rural Missouri. Throughout his childhood, he and his tattered family moved back and forth between Kansas City and Detroit, cities...
known for their rich heritage of jazz, blues, soul, and rhythm and blues. Detroit, where Eminem spent most of his teenage years, was the birthplace of Motown Records, Berry Gordy’s black music powerhouse that signed the Jackson Five, the Temptations, and the Supremes in the 1960s (see sidebar: Detroit). It was three white artists, however, who would bring the most attention to Detroit’s hip hop scene. Along with Eminem, Kid Rock and Insane Clown Posse broke into the mainstream in the 1990s, these two other artists fusing hip hop with hard rock, metal, classic rock, and country, while Eminem’s music remained truer to hip hop itself. Eminem spent his teenage years in Detroit, where he derived his street credibility from his lower class experience and geographic proximity to hip hop culture. Eminem performed and recorded with black artists, including Proof, D-12, and Royce da 5’9”, and after his records went platinum, he would seek record deals for these friends back in Detroit. Eminem got his musical start by memorizing and rapping songs to neighborhood kids who would listen. He emulated rap artists such as LL Cool J., Run-DMC, Big Daddy Kane, and the Beastie Boys by standing in front of a mirror practicing songs and moves. With his

**Detroit**

*Katherine V. Tsiopos-Wills*

Detroit, Michigan (aka Motown or Motor City) at one time was one of America’s strongest cities for music production and nightlife. According to *Billboard* and *Pollstar* magazines, the Detroit metro area was the number one U.S. summer concert destination in box office gross and attendance, often surpassing Madison Square Garden. In the sixties and seventies, Berry Gordy’s Motown Records promoted such artists as James Brown, Diana Ross and the Supremes, and the Jackson Five. Motown remained at the center of funk, R&B, and soul music, and this brought national attention to Detroit as a musical powerhouse.

The grassroots energy and prolific talent of Detroit’s hip hop scene, both underground and commercial, contributed to the 1990s Detroit music renaissance, with Eminem, D-12, Obie Trice, Proof, Royce da 5’9”, Insane Clown Posse, Kid Rock, J-Dilla, and Slum Village, to name a few who built on the legacy of Berry Gordy’s Motown Records. Detroit was regarded as the birthplace of eponymous Detroit techno electronic dance music, which was eagerly appropriated by European markets. Detroit metro also drew strong rock and roll audiences for groups such as the White Stripes.

Nationally, hip hop venues diversified though the mid-1980s, spearheaded by chocolate cities such as Detroit, Atlanta, Washington, DC, Baltimore, St. Louis, and Memphis. Concurrently, Boston, Chicago, Seattle, Houston, Miami, and locales in New Jersey developed hybrid hip hop artists and styles.
whiplike rhymes, storytelling skills, and blistering lyrical anger, Eminem had the makings of hip hop’s next superstar.

Eminem makes clear in his lyrics and in interviews that he wants to be seen as a rapper, not as a white rapper (see sidebar: Wiggers). After a decade in the music business and multiple platinum albums, Eminem has in many ways

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**Wiggers**

*Katherine V. Tsiopos-Wills*

As black urban underclass markers flooded the cultural scene in the 1980s in the form of hip hop culture, droves of white North American and European youth latched onto hip hop slang, fashion, and music. “Wigger,” a derogatory term for a white usurper of hip hop culture, is a combination of the words “white” and “nigger.” Wiggers (aka wiggas, whiggers, wiggas, Wafrican Americans) suffer from “ghettoitis,” or a denial of their white upbringing and craving for hip hop credentials. The terms received wide media coverage when Senator Robert Byrd in a Fox News interview commented on “White Niggers.” On “The Way I Am,” Eminem steadfastly refuted that he was a “wigger who just tries to be black.”

Today’s wigger parallels the 1950s white hipster or “white negro,” as scrutinized in Norman Mailer’s *The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster*. Mailer posited that following World War II, some white men began to appropriate the manners, language, and values of the black underclass. These hipster traits included living with a constant awareness of physical danger; seeing oneself as antagonistic to the “squares” or “lames” (mainstream people), communicating in a coded language that emphasized personal energy over class or social strength; staying composed or cool under stress; freeing repressed sexual desires and a primitive, pleasure-seeking nature within each person; and placing a premium on masculinity while repressing any appearance of femininity, which could be perceived as weakness.

Mailer’s white Negro pervaded the beatnik culture of the 1950s, with Jack Kerouac’s white, jazz-obsessed characters in books such as *On the Road*. Although Mailer was critical of the trend of white men adopting black mannerisms, slang, and attitude, Beat culture served to connect the counterculture of smoky jazz clubs with the ivory tower of poetry. Kerouac, along with Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Huncke, Gregory Corso, and other poets, sought to bring their writing out of the universities and to the people. They created a literary performance culture modeled, in part, after jazz performances.

Despite this lineage, however, the wigger holds a much lower cultural position than the 1950s hipster did. The appropriation by whites of jazz, blues, and rock and roll culture has created a mistrust of white people who become too fully immersed in black culture. The 1991 scandal of Vanilla Ice’s fake biography reinforced this mistrust in the hip hop community.
achieved his goal. Worldwide, he is the biggest-selling rap artist of all time. His sales, his rhyme skills, his acceptance by black rap stars, and the way he reopened hip hop to new white stars such as Paul Wall and Bubba Sparxxx now outweigh reservations about whether a white rapper belongs in hip hop. At the beginning of his career, however, Eminem found his white skin a detriment to his success. After Vanilla Ice, it was difficult for record labels to promote new white rappers. In 1990, Vanilla Ice entered the hip hop scene with his To the Extreme LP, featuring the hit single “Ice Ice Baby,” which depicted Miami street life as Ice cruised in his car and witnessed gunfights. The song became a pop hit with nationwide airplay. Casey Kasem on his Top 40 radio show heralded “Ice Ice Baby” as the number one rap single in history. Vanilla Ice’s success was stopped in its tracks, however, when a journalist exposed several lies in the official biography released by his record label (see sidebar: Vanilla Ice, under Beastie Boys). Soon after Vanilla Ice’s biography was called into question, he was subjected to a long succession of criticisms that he stole his hit song’s chorus from a black fraternity. This accusation was especially pertinent because Ice’s bio had attempted to present his background in lower-class neighborhoods, where he impressed his black peers with his rhyme skills. Combined, these infractions made Ice look like a white kid with no hip hop credentials making unprecedented money from hip hop music. Eminem, in contrast, writes intensely personal music about growing up poor and being criticized as a white kid trying to make it in hip hop.

Because wiggers cross racial boundaries, they are criticized by the ethnic group from which they come, as well as the ethnic group to whose culture they aspire. The effects of the wigger’s place both as a race traitor and a cultural leech is parodied in the Jamie Kennedy film Malibu’s Most Wanted. In 2003, Snoop Dogg’s MTV comedy show, Doggy Fizzle Televizzle, aired a sketch in which distressed white parents called a hotline to help their teen sons who suffered from being wiggers. Parodying TV docudramas such as Intervention, Snoop Dogg and company kidnapped and deprogrammed the wiggers, turning them back into stereotypically white teens.

Works Cited


Further Readings

Along with Vanilla Ice, the Beastie Boys, 3rd Bass, and House of Pain were Eminem’s primary white forerunners in hip hop. The Beastie Boys, whom Eminem named as an early and key musical inspiration, were born into affluent upper-middle-class Jewish families in the New York area. They began their career as a punk band in the early 1980s. Their school of hard knocks was in underground New York punk clubs, and later playing for hip hop crowds opening for Schoolly D, Run-DMC, and other rap pioneers. Affluent background aside, Ad-Rock, the youngest of the Beastie Boys, and an accomplished lyricist and MC, left his imprint on Eminem and the direction of hip hop and rock music through his lyrical innovations and decidedly high-pitched vocal style.

Eminem made one of his most significant contributions to hip hop early in his career. He reframed hip hop’s racial narratives in terms of lived authentic class experience instead of only color (Hess 372), thereby rescuing the future of white rap and rappers from Vanilla Ice’s legacy of co-optation by whites and assimilation into the mainstream. Eminem’s rap career was established through his close association with gangsta rap legend Dr. Dre, his intimately autobiographical lyrics, and the rhyme skills that helped him shine in MC battles. Further, Em didn’t try to hide his whiteness, but instead brought his race into lyrics, arguing that his whiteness encumbered his acceptance as a rapper, even as his “conspicuously white” (Armstrong 342) persona enhanced his marketability to broader and whiter audiences and smoothed the way for upcoming white rappers. He did not appropriate blackness per se; rather he reiterated his roots in poor white trash culture, with his living in trailer parks and growing up in a broken, dysfunctional family. He did not try to be black by imitation, but projected his lived experiences in poverty and the way he had paid his dues within hip hop culture, rhyming in Detroit clubs where the audience was less than accepting of the new white MC. Learning from the successes of the Beastie Boys and the failures of Vanilla Ice, Em learned how to better market himself as a crossover act by studying his white hip hop predecessors.

Eminem personified hip hop values: An MC must maintain composure while rhyming, whether on stage or in the street; an MC should draw source material from his own hardships; an MC should keep meter and rhythm. In gangsta rap, the subgenre from which Eminem develops much of his subject matter, artists present themselves as members of an oppressed group who take matters into their own hands to survive through crime. In the culture gangsta rap claims to represent, oppression and its resultant self-loathing create animosity toward those perceived as weaker or threatening. Gangsta rap, then, has been criticized for homophobic and misogynist lyrics. Eminem’s music is not gangsta rap per se, yet Eminem validated his position in hip hop by writing and performing, at times, a gangsta litany of homophobic and misogynist lyrics. Although Eminem emerged after the heyday of gangsta rap, his association with Dr. Dre, a founding member of N.W.A., places
him in a gangsta rap lineage that is reflected in his lyrics. Dre is featured prominently in Eminem’s lyrics and videos, and on the songs “My Name Is” and “Guilty Conscience,” he reminds his listeners of his link to N.W.A.

At the beginning of his career, Eminem was renowned for witty, often humorous freestyling that charmed audiences and won him MC battles. As recreated in his partly autobiographical film 8 Mile, Eminem bested his opponents by revealing intimate and embarrassing details of his personal life. This public vulnerability disarmed the MCs he battled and ultimately proved to be another of Eminem’s signature traits that strengthened his hip hop cachet. Trash-talking lyrics aside, these tortured rants and confessions endeared him to audiences and colleagues. Eminem’s lyrics tell complex stories in songs like “Stan,” “Toy Soldiers,” and “Mockingbird,” yet he could improvise lyrics in a battle, spewing verbal riffs in the same way that jazz musicians improvised with their instruments. Audiences could see Eminem was accomplished musically and had created a unique vocal style and a tactical approach to the MC battles where he would make his name.

WELFARE, BABIES, AND BASEMENT RAP BANDS: THE MAKING OF A RAPPER

Eminem’s first twenty years would serve as the emotional well from which he dipped to produce his art and provoke listeners. Eminem was born Marshall Bruce Mathers III in 1972, in St. Joseph, Missouri, near Kansas City. Eminem’s mother, Deborah Briggs-Mathers, was fifteen years of age when she gave birth to her son. He was under a year old when his father, Marshall Bruce Mathers II, abandoned his family. Eminem’s itinerant life oscillated between Kansas City and metro Detroit as Debbie moved in and out of trailer parks, relatives’ homes, and public housing. She proved unable to provide an economically and socially stable home life for her family. This unstable lifestyle contributed to Eminem’s skill in connecting with his audience. A significant portion of childhood was spent in an almost all-black public housing project in Detroit, where he developed quick-witted wordplay and salty rhymes to defuse violent bullies and gangs. For a few years, the family lived near Eight Mile Road, which serves as a dividing line between Detroit’s poorer black and white communities. Eminem eventually dropped out of Lincoln High School in Warren, a suburb of Detroit, at the age of seventeen. Nonetheless, he established key friends and professional connections at high school, in his Detroit neighborhoods, and in the underground Detroit club scene, which would serve him well as he became a full-time musician. Eminem would also meet his future wife Kimberly Ann Scott at his Detroit metro high school. He and Kim had their first child on December 25, 1995, Haile Jade Scott. Haile would serve as a topic in several albums along with Eminem’s themes of unrequited maternal and paternal attention that he was denied as a child.
Eminem was nine years old when his uncle, Ronald (Ronnie) Dean Polk-
ingham, introduced him to his first rap song. Eminem and Ronnie were less
than three months apart in age. Ronnie played Ice-T’s “Reckless” from the
1984 Breakin’ soundtrack. From then on, the two best friends listened to rap
tapes and recorded their own whenever they could. Ronnie committed suicide
on December 14, 1991, at the age of nineteen, leaving Eminem to deal with
the loss of his uncle, close friend, and rap partner. The impact of this loss is
evident in Eminem’s life and career: he tattooed his arm in tribute to his uncle,
and he commemorated him in the song “Cleaning Out My Closet.” Prior to
Ronnie’s death, Eminem had begun working toward a career in rap, and
Ronnie’s suicide gave him even more motivation toward making his music.

In 1990, Eminem and Proof (DeShaun Holton) formed D-12. Proof, who
also performed with the group 5 Elementz, had the idea to form the band as
they continued to practice and perform their music in Detroit basements. The
band name D-12 is derived from Dirty Dozen: there are six MCs in the band
but each MC has an alter ego. With Proof’s vision, Eminem progressed from
performing in basements with the rap band Sole Intent (with Proof and DJ
Butterfingers), which eventually led to his first independent album, Infinite. It
sold about about 500 copies, most of which were sold out of car trunks. It
was with Proof that Mathers decided to call himself M&M. Then Mathers
changed his self-chosen name to Eminem or, more affectionately, Em. Emi-
nem toyed with naming as a process of self-recreation. His alter egos, Slim
Shady, Marshall Mathers, and Eminem, would appear in the eponymous
albums The Slim Shady LP and the The Marshall Mathers LP.

Eminem credits much of his success to the close and savvy inner circle of
friends, Proof in particular, who compensated for years of familial instability.
With Proof and the other four members of D-12, there was no separation
between work and life. Eminem recalled a time when Proof, tired of seeing
Eminem wear the same dirty old shoes, bought him a new pair. The early
appeal of Eminem could be better understood if one were to look at his and
his crew’s effect on the Detroit club scene. Even before Eminem had signed a
deal with Dr. Dre’s label Aftermath Records, his presence onstage was un-
deniable. Eminem began to gain notoriety in freestyle battles in local clubs.
One key element of his success was the element of surprise. When the pale and
relatively geeky-looking Eminem closed in on the mic, the audiences often
booed; after all, he was not black. Yet Eminem turned both black urban and
white suburban scowls of distrust into smiles and hip-swinging affirmation.
He could woo multiracial urbanites at Manhattan’s Sound Factory or sub-
urban teens from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

Like the Beastie Boys in the 1980s, Em found acceptance among his black
hip hop peers. The B-Boys were one of the first acts signed to the Def Jam
label, and they recorded and toured with hip hop artists such as Run-DMC,
Schoolly D, Public Enemy, Biz Markie, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest.
The Beastie Boys built a bridge between black and white audiences that
Eminem later utilized. Certainly, the fact that the Beasties were managed by African American Russell Simmons did not hurt the band’s access to black venues and audiences, just as Dr. Dre’s vouching for Eminem’s skills helped him gain a wider audience. Dre provided a link between newcomer Eminem and a tradition of hip hop culture. Furthermore, Eminem was quick to credit the early musical influences on his musical heritage, including both East and West Coast rappers.

Upon accepting his 2003 Grammy for Best Rap Album (*The Eminem Show*), Em gave props to those rappers whose influence helped him make it: Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys, LL Cool J, Kool G. Rap, Masta Ace, Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Dr. Dre and N.W.A., Treach from Naughty by Nature, Nas, Tupac, Biggie, Jay-Z, and the Notorious B.I.G. This list proved Eminem’s knowledge of hip hop history, as well as emphasized his desire to pay homage to the MCs who influenced his own unique style. Eminem also paid homage to Tupac Shakur for his enormous contributions to hip hop. Eminem would later produce the track “Runnin’” for the film *Tupac: Resurrection*. Eminem used existing vocal tracks from the late rappers Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. to create a new song in which the two rival MCs posthumously reunite.

As a fan of hip hop from an early age, Eminem understood the importance of tradition and of giving proper credit to the old-school innovators who influenced his own style, and Eminem certainly created his own style, with vocals drawing from the cadence of Masta Ace, the subject material of N.W.A., and often the speed raps of Big Daddy Kane as well as Em’s southern contemporaries, Outkast. Before deciding to go solo, Eminem performed with groups such as Basement Productions, the New Jacks, and Sole Intent. In 1997, his *Infinite* CD received a less than lukewarm reception from the local hip hop community, who believed that his work was derivative of New York rappers Nas or Jay-Z. Not to be deterred, Em pursued with renewed vigor appearances at local radio stations and national MC battles through the late 1990s. Eventually, a promotional tape reached Dr. Dre, who signed Eminem to his label. The collaboration of Dre and Eminem led to the crossover triple platinum success of *The Slim Shady LP*.

**DR. DRE: PRODUCING A NEW TALENT**

Eminem’s hard work in the Detroit hip hop underground paid off when he won second place in the 1997 Rap Olympics MC Battle in Los Angeles. This battle credential, along with Dr. Dre’s sophisticated production and marketing, brought Eminem to MTV audiences and crossover status. Although Eminem’s rhyme skills are evident, his commercial appeal may have also been built from the fact that he was white. Some evidence suggests that Eminem was selected by Dre as a white artist to appeal to what has been called rap’s largest market: white teen suburbanites (Armstrong 336). Dre provided some
guest vocals and appeared in the music video for Eminem’s first single, “My Name Is,” in which Eminem parodies contemporary pop icons such as Marilyn Manson. The song’s title and chorus, as well as the personal revelations of the song’s lyrics, reflect Dre’s and Eminem’s strategy for introducing this new white rapper to the world.

Though thousands of miles apart, Eminem and Dre shared similar passions and childhood experiences. Both grew up poor with a passion for music. At a young age, Dre was playing turntables in his Compton, California, home to entertain the adults of his extended family. Dre’s mother surrounded him with the sentiments and sounds of Detroit Motown, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Smokey Robinson, and James Brown. Any funky sound was a good sound. Music was an emotional release. Dre, like Eminem, quit school to focus on his music; he formed the proto–hip hop band World Class Wreckin’ Cru. Both Eminem and Dre started locally at the bottom of their neighborhoods with music as a survival tool. In 1986, Dre, Ice Cube, and Eazy-E cofounded the controversial gangsta rap group N.W.A., whose 1988 song “Fuck tha Police” catapulted them into the national limelight, if not onto the airwaves. In 1992, Dre’s Death Row Records, cofounded with ex-football star Suge Knight, released The Chronic, the epitome of West Coast hip hop sound that flooded the airwaves across the nation. Spin magazine named the Grammy-winning album, with its $50 million in retail sales, one of the most influential albums of the 1990s.

The not-so-obvious complexity of Eminem and his rise to hip hop stardom is that while he lived and exploited his outsider, bad boy lifestyle, he was also willing to play by the rules to study the hip hop business and understand his tenuous place in the culture. While Eminem’s lyrics often seemed to indulge his emotions, he exhibited the discipline, humility, and foresight to build his name in underground Detroit rap battles and to design a business model to promote his self-financed recordings. Like his hip hop contemporaries Master P and Wu-Tang Clan, he was simultaneously an underground rap artist, an ambitious businessman selling albums out of his car trunk, a visionary, and a musician. Eminem had the street cred, the ambition, and the talent. More important, he was willing to subordinate his personal ego and trust his career to Dr. Dre, who would enhance each of these features. His production skills would take Eminem’s rhymes to a new level, and his label, Aftermath Records, would provide the worldwide promotion and distribution that Eminem could not have achieved on his own. Beyond these more obvious advantages of signing to Dre’s record label, Eminem also benefited from Dre’s hip hop lineage. His work in N.W.A. aside, Dre introduced rap listeners to Snoop Doggy Dogg and the D.O.C., and was known for discovering exciting new talents and helping to shape their sound.

Dre produced Eminem’s Slim Shady LP, which sold over 3 million copies in the first eighteen months of release. Raw to the point of being mean spirited and embarrassingly naked, the personal nature of Slim Shady impressed those
in the music business. One of the contributions Eminem made to hip hop was to use lyrics and topics that explored his own interior landscape. Hip hop culture in the 1990s had focused heavily on a handful of embedded values premised on authenticity, or being real. In gangsta rap, a hip hop subgenre, rappers often demonstrated their realness through masculine posturing, misogyny, violence, and homophobia. Gangsta rap’s exemplars had to have street credibility that most often came with documented criminality and underclass status. Disrespecting people who were called hos, sluts, bitches, and fags was standard fare on gangsta rap tracks; Eminem, however, took the material one step further. Eminem not only disrespected women; he dared to disrespect his mother and his wife in detail and repeatedly as part of his performances. While gangsta rappers lauded guns, money, and bitches as status symbols, Eminem turned these symbols inward to vocalize the psychological costs of being a member of an underclass that spawns self-hatred, crime, and cycles of violence and poverty. His violent songs played out as revenge fantasies born from a wounded psyche more than they stood as gangsta posturing or testaments to his aggressive nature. In fact, the songs were clearly fantasies, and on “Stan,” Eminem describes the use of violent fantasy in his music. Eminem brought to the light that family and friends in similar circumstances of poverty do not support each other; rather, they claw at each other’s emotional independence and economic success. In his raps, Eminem attacked not only women but the matriarchy that invisibly scaffolds the masculine posturing in gangsta rap.

Eminem became famous selling songs that aired his grievances against the women that molded his life. With fame and fortune often come legal complications, and it was no different for Eminem. However, Eminem turned a classic ghetto trope by remixing the legal entanglements of his life into his art. Eminem’s stories of childhood poverty, drugs, and family turbulence with his wife and mother had nurtured his art. Now his lyrics provided fodder for personal and legal retaliation. In 1999, Eminem’s mother filed suit for defamation of character after hearing her son’s lyrics that reported her drug use. On “My Name Is,” for example, Eminem rhymes, “I just found out my mom does more dope than I do.” Laying bare such personal trauma is part of Eminem’s appeal. When his mother sued him, he incorporated this new development into his lyrics for “Marshall Mathers.”

Eminem remixes the events of his life and exposes not only his anger but his emotional vulnerability, leaving no separation between his art and his life. In his lyrics, there is no suburban propriety and no urbane distance. Eminem develops his authenticity through being real with his audience and telling true stories about his life. Bringing a tradition from the blues into gangsta rap (as Ice Cube and the Geto Boys did before him), Eminem writes about his woman troubles. His mother, wife, and daughter make frequent appearances in his lyrics. Not to be left out of the public humiliation of family dysfunction, Kim Mathers openly took offense at Eminem’s graphic lyrics in the songs...
“’97 Bonnie & Clyde” and “Kim.” Eminem would also rehash his and Kim’s marriage problems into the song “Soldier.”

**BEEF**

Eminem’s lyrics chronicle his anger and frustration, and these emotions don’t stop with his family. Like many other hip hop artists such as Tupac and Biggie or Jay-Z and Nas, Eminem has been entrenched in conflicts with other artists, known in hip hop lyrics as beef. Beef promotes hip hop music in three ways: It provides ample topic material for tracks as rappers dis each other; it stimulates discussion about who is the better rhymer or lyricist, and therefore challenges each rapper involved to showcase his or her ultimate skills; and beef turns hip hop recordings into a competition that recalls the battles of hip hop’s earlier days, when MCs went head to head at parties or in the parks, in rhyme circles known as ciphers. Hip hop’s lyrical rivalries could be compared to verbal professional wrestling: They entail airing of animosity in songs, and public banter and dissing in magazine interviews and on radio shows. Beef functions as a way to secure a place in the hip hop hierarchy, gain publicity, and air one’s discontents. These conflicts require quick responses to one’s opponent, utilizing the verbal practices of African griots or storytellers who prized verbal quickness. This keen control of language could disarm opponents. In African American culture, the tradition translated to the practice of the mostly good-natured but important game called the Dozens. This verbal exchange exemplified a code of conduct and control expected among members of an underclass. The ability to stay composed while arguing one’s case with wit and poise remains a coveted form of street power. These sophisticated verbal exchanges were essential to establishing a sense of hip hop community.

In the 1970s, DJs tried to outdo each other by using competition as a way to heighten excitement among people at block parties. The goal of Kool Herc, the father of hip hop, was to build a stronger sound system than his competitors, DJs like Afrika Bambaataa and Pete DJ Jones. When MCs started rhyming over these DJ routines, their vocal crowd incitement soon led to verbal challenges from other MCs about who was better on the mic. On one hand, beef can be a marketing strategy that promotes a feud between two artists as a way to connect their records. When one MC answers another’s challenge, the new record is geared toward a waiting audience that expects a response. In the 1980s, the beef between Roxanne Shante and U.T. F.O. spawned close to 100 answer records from various rap artists. These artists attacked each other’s personas, fashion style, gender, and sexuality, along with rhyme skill, but the animosity was limited to their songs. In the 1990s, beef infamously spilled over to physical violence with the murders of Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. While neither murder has been solved,
the long-term beef between these artists is believed to have set in motion the events that led to their killings. Eminem, through his association with Dre, falls into the lineage of the Tupac-Biggie beef. Their rivalry created a rhyme war for ascendancy between West and East Coast rap artists, specifically Death Row Records on the West Coast and Bad Boy Records on the East. The East Coast was the undisputed birthplace and world center of hip hop until 1992, with the phenomenally successful release of Dre’s *The Chronic*. *The Chronic* heralded the breakout of a West Coast flourishing of artists and labels: Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dogg, and Death Row Records. Bad Boy’s stars, to name a few, were Notorious B.I.G., Mase, Junior M.A.F.I.A., Lil’ Kim, and Puff Daddy. The deaths of Tupac and Biggie forever removed beef from the merely discursive and local plane. Yet their deaths did not stop beef from happening. Rather, the rivalry seemed to spark new beefs. With two of the biggest selling hip hop artists murdered, a battle for supremacy took place. Jay-Z challenged Nas for the title of King of New York, and a series of new beefs were initiated by artists associated with Eminem: Proof and D-12 versus Royce da 5’9”; 50 Cent versus Ja Rule; 50 Cent versus the Game; 50 Cent versus DJ Green Lantern; G-Unit versus Fat Joe; and 50 Cent versus Lil’ Kim.

The most significant beef for Eminem himself has been his ongoing and contentious rivalry with Ray Benzino (Raymond Scott), co-owner and editor of *The Source*, at one time hip hop’s premier magazine. Benzino did little to hide his animosity toward Eminem as he argued that Eminem’s success as a white man hindered Latino and black recognition and financial growth. If Eminem got too large a cut of the rap album profits, no profits would be left for rappers of color. Curiously, Benzino is himself biracial and Dave Mays, co-owner of *The Source*, is white. Even so, Benzino and company saw Eminem, Jimmy Iovine, and Interscope Records as barriers to recognition for authentic black hip hop culture. Benzino recorded a track disrespecting Eminem. When Eminem heard about the upcoming dis, he recorded two dis tracks against Benzino. Escalating the vitriolic rhetoric, Benzino attacked Eminem personally, calling him the “2003 Vanilla Ice” on his song “Pull Your Skirt Up.” He obliquely threatened Em’s daughter Haile and threatened physical violence to Eminem if they ever met face to face. The verbal wrestling match spread to the radio when on-air personality Angie Martinez invited Eminem to air his views. Benzino called the radio station, challenging Eminem to a physical fight.

Benzino consistently rated Em low in the *The Source* magazine’s one- to five-mic rating system, while Benzino rated his own groups consistently in the four- to five-mic range. In 2000, *The Source* gave the nine-time-platinum *Marshall Mathers LP* only a two-mic rating. This was later upped to four mics on the heels of vehement protest from readers and the hip hop community. In a press conference, Benzino stated that Em was ruining hip hop and provided an early freestyle tape by Em in which he disrespected black women by calling them money hungry gold-diggers (a topic used by black rappers...
such as Big Daddy Kane in the eighties, and one that Kanye West turned into a hit record with “Gold Digger” in 2005). Benzino, with *The Source* as his weapon, pounded away at Em because he used the word *nigger* in a song. In both cases mentioned above, Em apologized publicly and blamed his lapse in judgment on youthful indiscretion and ignorance, thereby quickly deflating public disapproval. Em replied to Benzino in two underground dis tracks, “Nail in the Coffin,” and “The Sauce,” and extended the beef in the track “Yellow Brick Road” (*Encore*).

Arguments for black purity in hip hop notwithstanding, *The Source* featured Em in its pages. Ultimately, Eminem profited from the beef when he was awarded a large sum of money for defamation and copyright infringement. In the end, Benzino’s credibility, his lagging album sales, and his legal entanglements brought him under scrutiny at *The Source*. He ignored a legal injunction and published some of Eminem’s lyrics. As a result, *The Source* was found in contempt of court and forced to pay compensation to Eminem and his label, Shady Records. Benzino was fired and in 2006 shareholders of *The Source* ousted Benzino, though his legal troubles did not end there. Benzino’s bias hurt the magazine itself, which lost credibility as the top hip hop magazine, making way for newcomers such as *XXL*. Many fans still believe that the high-profile public battle between Benzino and Eminem was an elaborate publicity stunt.

In other beefs, Everlast, the former front man of the white, Irish, hip hop group House of Pain, insulted Eminem in retaliation for a perceived insult. The beef went back and forth on rap tracks with disses including jabs at family members. On “Quitter,” Eminem ridiculed Everlast for his religious conversion to Islam, his failure with House of Pain, and his move to a rock music format with his solo album *Whitey Ford Sings the Blues*. The beef between Eminem and Insane Clown Posse (ICP) started in 1995 when Em was handing out flyers for one of his performances. The flyer mentioned that ICP might make an appearance. Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope took offense at the assumption that ICP would play with Eminem. They scorned the thought of playing at Em’s party, which prompted a series of dis tracks such as “Get You Mad” and “Drastic Measures.” The Eminem and ICP beef was turned up a notch when Eminem dissed ICP on Howard Stern’s radio talk show. In response, ICP with rap crew Twizted returned to the Howard Stern show with a dis track called “Slim Anus,” ridiculing Eminem with samples from his own song “My Name Is.” “Slim Anus” alluded to Eminem’s homosexual tendencies with Dr. Dre, and borrowed from prison slang to depict Eminem as Dre’s bitch, a tactic Dre himself had used in earlier beefs with Eazy-E and Ice Cube. ICP continued to deride Eminem’s mother and his wife, Kim. Eminem would shame ICP by calling them merely Detroit suburbanites without real hip hop roots. His beef with ICP would eventually lead Em to his arrest for pulling an unloaded gun on Dougie Doug, a friend of Insane Clown Posse. Em was charged with brandishing a firearm in public, assault with a dangerous
weapon, and two counts of concealed weapons possession. He pleaded no contest and received one year of probation concurrent with another sentence. Currently, ICP and Eminem are known to have declared a truce.

In another Detroit beef, Em had an on-again off-again conflict with Royce da 5’9”. Em’s beef with Royce is likely his most personal beef, because Royce was Em’s close friend and hype man during the Detroit underground years. Together they rapped “Scary Movies,” “Nuttin’ to Do,” and “Bad Meets Evil”—Royce being the former and Em being the latter. “Bad Meets Evil” is considered by many to be their best collaborative track (*The Slim Shady LP*). True to hip hop form, nonetheless, the two maintained a testy relationship that exemplified how beef could benefit and destroy rappers within the hip hop promotion industry.

Eminem opened the doors for Royce in 1999 to Dr. Dre and a successful collaboration, until Royce’s manager leaked in a radio interview that Royce was ghostwriting Dre’s lyrics, the implication being that Royce was better than Dre at writing lyrics, and that Dre was hiding something. Dre summarily shut the door on Royce’s opportunity by cutting off any of his material and imminent record deals. Royce harbored a belief that Eminem never gave him a chance at Shady Records because of Em’s ties to Dre and ongoing problems between Eminem and Proof’s D-12 crew and Royce’s D-Elite crew. In 2002, Eminem refused to allow Royce to sign on with Shady Records but signed 50 Cent. Royce and D-Elite still agreed to join Em’s Anger Management Tour. The partnership soon soured and turned into a beef between D-12 and D-Elite over Royce’s dis lyrics complaining about the Anger Management Tour. Detroit radio stationsizzled with dis tracks from each band, playing retribution tracks “Smack Down” and “Back Down” against “Malcolm X” and “Bang Bang.” Em and Royce hovered above the fracas, never confronting each other. The beef between Royce and Proof of D-12 simmered for two years until it boiled over when the crews flaunted guns at each other. Both crews were hauled off by police to cool down in a Detroit jail cell. Since that time, Em, Royce, and their respective crews have cooled their animosities. Royce bounced among many different recording labels, but did release the *Independent’s Day LP* in 2005. Like Em, Royce began to reflect on personal and professional blunders in his tracks. He mourned friends who lost their lives to violence and friendships lost and squandered in music career aspirations (“Regardless” and “Death Is Certain”).

Outside of hip hop circles, Eminem has been targeted by critic and author Heshem Samy Abdel-Alim, who pursued more esoteric and less visceral bees by scorning Eminem’s hip hop pedigree. Abdel-Alim implied that Em was a latecomer to the hip hop scene in the 1990s, which was already on the streets in the very early 1970s, before Em’s birth. Further scorn came from critics who labeled Em’s use of street vernacular as infantile and sophomoric and his poetics of hard end rhymes as doggerel; these critics missed Eminem’s complex rhythms and complicated internal rhymes (see sidebar: Hip Hop Icons of Hip Hop).
Content aside, the primacy of the word in hip hop music has linked hip hop lyrics to slam poetry, jazz poetry, the talking blues, bad man legends, toasts, and other oral poetic traditions. Even though lyrics, nuance, and stylistics were subordinated to the beat, early hip hop’s acute sense of wordplay opened discussions among scholars, musicians, critics, and fans about a poetry renaissance. University instructors in the United States and United Kingdom added curricula to English language and literature classes examining hip hop lyrics generally and Eminem specifically.

With his complex rhythms, bridge rhymes, and visual imagery, Eminem brings a poet’s skills to his lyrics. However, he is not as involved in connecting hip hop and poetry as other artists have been. In 2002, Russell Simmons, founder of Def Jam Records, developed an HBO series, *Def Poetry Jam*, to showcase readings and performances by poets. On *Def Poetry Jam* and in spoken-word venues like the Nuyorican Poetry Café and the Bowery Poetry Club, spoken word often crosses boundaries with hip hop performances. The artists Saul Williams, Jill Scott, and Sage Francis each incorporate hip hop styles into their poetry readings, and hip hop culture itself is often a topic for spoken-word poets. Williams’s “Telegram” finds hip hop lying in a ditch, “dead to itself.” The poet proceeds to offer hip hop culture a litany of advice on how to revive itself by abandoning consumer-driven rhymes about cars and jewelry and returning to its roots.

*Further Resources*


*Def Poetry Jam* Season 1 DVD. HBO, 2004.


and Poetry). Another attack on his lyrics came from pop star Christina Aguilera, who feuded with Eminem over his references to her in lyrics. Eminem alluded to both Britney Spears and Aguilera’s sex lives in the track “The Real Slim Shady” (2000). While not strictly a hip hop beef, Em’s clash
with gay coalitions, religious fundamentalists, and parents captured worldwide attention—and publicity that eventually secured more publicity and sales. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and other gay activists declared his lyrics “hate speech.” Em captured the ire of conservative Lynne Cheney, wife of the sitting vice president of the United States, mother of Mary Cheney, a lesbian, and author of *Sisters*, a novel with some lesbian themes. She castigated Em as a “violent misogynist” to the Senate committee hearing on violence in the entertainment industry, saying that his words posed a danger to children and the nation. Parents fumed as *Teen* magazine reported that 74 percent of its readers surveyed would like to date Em.

Contrary to ghetto form, Em chose not to enter into a global beef with these detractors from outside of the hip hop community. Rather, Em embraced gay white Anglo icon Elton John and let his actions speak louder than his words as he performed a duet with Elton at the 2001 Grammy Awards and hugged him at the end of the song. He would later deny any knowledge of or problem with Elton’s homosexuality. The message to detractors was that they should focus on his art instead of lobbing ad hominem attacks. Like other great artists, Em played to all sides of the sexuality spectrum by contradicting his homophobic lyrics with his tolerant words in interviews. Where the real Slim Shady, or Eminem, or Marshall Mathers stood on homosexuality was ambiguous. Dance clubs with both straight and gay audiences continued to play his rap songs. Another unqualified indication of support came when Academy Award-winning actor Jodie Foster closed her speech at the 2006 University of Pennsylvania commencement ceremonies with a standing ovation to lyrics from Eminem’s Oscar-winning “Lose Yourself.”

Eminem’s beefs often had little to do with his own conflicts with other rap artists; he was involved by association in his friends’ beefs. The beef between 50 Cent and Ja Rule entangled Eminem, although it existed from the old days of 50 and Ja hanging around South Jamaica in Queens, New York. 50 Cent volleyed the first recorded dis on “Life’s on the Line,” rejecting friendships and partnerships from the streets: “We ain’t partners and we damn sure ain’t friends.” Eminem catalogued his take on the beef on the track “Like Toy Soldiers”: “We just inherited 50’s beef with Murder Inc [Ja’s record label]” With 50 Cent securely ensconced with Dre and Eminem, rappers Busta Rhymes, Obie Trice, and G-Unit joined the East Coast entourage. Ja Rule fueled the beef by dissing Eminem’s wife, calling her a slut and crackhead while also targeting Eminem’s daughter Haile.

**EMINEM’S POLITICS: THE EVOLUTION OF AN “I DON’T GIVE A FUCK” RAPPER**

Except for a few instances, Eminem’s early lyrics did not highlight sociopolitical themes as consistently as those of artists like Tupac Shakur or Kanye
West. While Tupac challenged police brutality and government corruption (on “Point the Finga”), and Kanye took on the global diamond trade (on “Diamonds (From Sierra Leone)”) and conspiracy theories that the U.S. government created AIDS and the crack epidemic (on “Crack Music”), Eminem for the most part raged at the personal exploitation he felt at the hands of his family and friends. His lyrics bubbled with anger at women and beef with his colleagues. He rapped class rage as a cultural spectacle lacking political protest or outrage. It was only after increasing criticism and ridicule was heaped on him by gay activists, women’s rights groups, and political conservatives such as vice presidential wives Lynne Cheney and Tipper Gore that he responded with lyrical vitriol about censorship and participated in more strategic interviews.

His most overt sociopolitical consciousness-raising songs include “White America” and “Mosh.” In “White America,” he reintroduced black modes of expression into white suburban homes. He spoke to “suburban kids” who without him would not have to face certain truths about their own culture. He was the poster boy for the low-class, urban hip hop gangtas rubbing fear into the faces of white suburban parents. Eminem’s antiwar/pro-voting video “Mosh” was released just before the November 2004 election as an indictment of George W. Bush and the Iraq war. Within twenty-four hours of the “Mosh” premiere on MTV’s Total Request Live, it hit number one. The protagonist in the video resembles Eminem as he begins to mobilize police forces, soldiers in fatigues, and black-hooded masses to storm the White House, but then winds up calling for social action through voting. The term mosh goes through several iterations in the song. Em envisions mosh pits outside the Oval Office. He calls for everyone “to mosh through this desert storm.” Finally, he castigates Bush for trying to impress his father and calls for the end of blood for oil. At the end of the video, no violence occurs. Instead, the screen fades out to the words “Vote Tuesday, November 2.” The message of “Mosh” was powerful because it rekindled public discussion among Eminem’s generation about the U.S.-Iraq war.

EMINEM AND THE NEW BREED OF WHITE SOUTHERN RAPPERS

A burgeoning movement of southern rappers and rap groups both black and white began incrementally infiltrating the hip hop music scene in the mid-1990s. Many of these artists were less well known than Eminem but were performing at the same time as Eminem developed his musical oeuvre. White rappers Bubba Sparxxx and Haystak heralded the “new South” movement. In the context of rap music, the new South music reflected southern ethnic diversity and urbanization. Bubba Sparxxx, born in LaGrange, Georgia, blended rapping with banjos, fiddles, and harmonicas while claiming country authenticity of poverty, violence, drugs, and dysfunctional families. Sparxxx
did not escape the eye of Jimmy Iovine of Interscope records, who signed Sparxxx with the New Beat Club label of southern record producer Timbaland, who had also produced for LL Cool J, Xzibit, Jay-Z, Tweet, and the Game. Timbaland produced both Sparxxx’s debut album *Dark Days, Bright Night* (2002) and *Deliverance* (2003). Sparxxx’s hit singles “Ugly” (2001) and “Ms. New Booty” (2006) brought him name recognition and created a buzz about white southern rappers and new subgenres of southern hip hop out of locales like Houston.

Haystak, of Nashville, Tennessee, pressed three albums (1998’s *Mak Million*, 2000’s *Car Fulla White Boys*, and 2002’s *The Natural*) that sold hundreds of thousands of copies with almost no marketing, radio, or financial support. Haystak, a white country boy, grabbed the attention of Scarface of the Geto Boys, who signed him to the Def Jam South record label. Unlike Eminem, Haystak refused to contextualize rap as a fundamentally African American musical form necessarily growing out of hip hop urban culture. To Haystak, rap is a genre without racial categories. There are white rappers and there are black rappers. Haystak sought to dispel the social myth that white equates with wealth and black equates with poverty. Hip hop is a culture of the poverty class, not race or region, and for these reasons lower and lower-middle-class white Americans embrace rapping.

Another white rap artist from Detroit, Kid Rock, played on white southern identity through his connections to country music in his fashion style and his lyrics in songs like “Cowboy.” Kid Rock has maintained an ongoing relationship with Eminem since they were reputed to have gotten into an argument at a Kid Rock autograph signing when Eminem was seventeen years old. The two would eventually form a professional bond when Eminem provided a guest verse on Kid Rock’s *Devil Without a Cause* album. Kid Rock was from the Detroit suburbs. He escaped boredom and familial angst by going to the Mount Clemens, Michigan, housing project to spin records at basement parties. Kid Rock is purported to have earned his nickname as he spun records and rapped in lounges and parking lots when listeners exclaimed, “Look at that white kid rock.” Kid Rock’s high-energy stage presence was undeniable, as was his musical breadth and virtuosity. He rapped, vocalized, and played guitar, bass, percussion, keyboard, banjo, and turntables.

him from being taken seriously as a supporter by the political right. Furthermore, the Federal Communications Commission levied the largest government fine to date on college radio station WSUC-FM at the State University of New York for indecency: $23,750 for airing the track “Yodeling in the Valley” with its graphic and metaphorical riffs on oral sex. The FCC fine was eventually decreased. Though Eminem and Kid Rock were blond, disenfranchised, musically talented and ambitious whites from the Detroit environs, their audiences differed, with Em capturing primarily the hip hop listeners and Kid capturing the rock market. Unlike Eminem, Kid Rock did not solidify his core constituency within the tight Detroit hip hop community.

**RUMORS OF A THIRTY-SOMETHING EARLY RETIREMENT FOR EMINEM**

Rumors of Eminem’s early retirement in his thirties started surfacing in 2004 with the release of the *Encore* album. Eminem was quick to dispel rumors of his retirement in an MTV interview, affirming that he would never stop making music and being involved in the music business. In fact, he said he was using his time to explore other music avenues such as promoting other musicians’ careers and finding new artists for his record label. Fans’ concern and his comments about retirement came on the heels of three disturbing events between December 2005 and April 2006 that made Eminem more reclusive, thus less visible on the club and music scene.

First, there were the Detroit-based shootings of his inner circle: Obie Trice and Proof. Obie Trice was shot in the head by a highway drive-by shooter on New Year’s Eve, 2005. Obie survived the assault but could not have the bullet removed from his skull. And Proof, one of Eminem’s best friends, was fatally shot at an 8 Mile club on April 11, 2006. More than just a friend, Proof was Em’s hype man and coperformer during almost all of his performances, and was best man at his wedding. Proof’s absence would have significant effects on both Em’s personal well-being and his artistic production. The track “Like Toy Soldiers” (*Encore*, 2004) could easily be interpreted as a swan song. The album cover pictures Em giving a bow, and the set closes with the track “Curtains Down.” The “Like Toy Soldiers” track blends marching band sounds with a powerful lyrical message about Em’s exhaustion with the ongoing strife in the hip hop community.

Em provocatively said “Like Toy Soldiers” was about walking away. The track’s meaning was ambiguous as to whether it meant walking away from his music career or just putting past bad business dealings behind and moving on. In the track, he specifically referred to going “toe to toe with Benzino” and *The Source*, losing his composure when his daughter Haile’s name was mentioned by another rapper, and being sickened by the 50 Cent and Ja feud. He mourned the ongoing feuds in the rap community. He reiterated personal
and professional problems with *The Source* magazine and its editor Benzino. The greatest hits album *Curtain Call* (2005) suggested that Em was considering retreating from the hip hop limelight. In closing, Em called for a peaceful resolution to the hip hop strife. Like an omen, the music video for “Like Toy Soldiers” depicted Proof being killed in a shooting. Perhaps as Eminem entered his thirties, he was thinking it was time to ease out of the hip hop scene and into something less hazardous before the ghetto struck again, as it had with his closest friends.

Em would find both musical and acting opportunities in filmmaking venues premised on his success with *8 Mile*, his quasi-biographical film about a poor white rapper (B. Rabbit) seeking to transcend the limitations of his family, class, and environment by rapping his way to acceptance and recognition from his urban hip hop community. The film was notable for its naturalistic camera style that captured in stark verisimilitude the Detroit streets on the poor side of town by highlighting smoky blue backgrounds, gray skies and factories, and squeaky, rusty beater cars. Shot on location in Detroit, the film contained all the classic dramatic elements found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*: protagonists, antagonists, a simple plot with rising action, climax, and denouement—plus the elements of music and humor for periodic catharsis. Some critics discredit *8 Mile* for its rock-pop-rap movie genre clichés and sly referential narrative; yet the film struck an emotional chord with a significant viewer base that approved of the emotionally raw scenes and characters. The film earned a box office take of $51 million on opening day (November 8, 2002) and worldwide gross of $243 million by spring of 2003. Solid performances by Eminem, Mekhi Phifer, Brittany Murphy, and Kim Basinger, and direction by Curtis Hanson complemented the filmmakers’ apparent goal to pull back the veil on race and class turmoil in the gritty hip hop underclass.

Eminem’s trajectory seems headed toward public and professional contributions in the areas of politics and music production and personal attention to his daughter, Haile. As Em entered his thirties, he joined a cohort of thirty fellow hip hop artists and Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick at the Detroit Hip-Hop Summit 2004, encouraging listeners to vote and broach pressing sociopolitical issues. After initially being bankrolled by Interscope Records, Eminem’s Shady Records company is succeeding at developing hip hop talent as a Detroit-based label, albeit headquartered in New York. He continued to grubstake and nurture new talent through Shady Records by producing albums and tracks for D-12, Obie Trice, Status Quo, 50 Cent, and G-Unit. Moving into Dre’s role as impresario, Eminem seeks and develops new talent. Eminem nominated 50 Cent as his most inspirational rapper, and Dre followed suit by signing 50 Cent, including him in more CDs and the *8 Mile* film soundtrack with the hit “Wanksta.”

If Eminem does retire from the hip hop community, he will do so at the top of his game with four solo studio albums: 1999’s *The Slim Shady LP*, 2000’s...
The Marshall Mathers LP, 2002’s The Eminem Show, Encore, nine Grammies, and a Best Song Oscar for the 8 Mile track “Lose Yourself.” He will be the bestselling hip hop artist up to 2006, having sold more than 25 million albums in the United States and generating more than $1 billion in global album sales by attracting a larger and more diverse hip hop audience worldwide.

See also: Beastie Boys, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg, Tupac Shakur

WORKS CITED


FURTHER RESOURCES


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The Slim Shady EP. Web Entertainment, 1997
Missy Elliott, a five-time Grammy Award winner, has carved out a hip hop niche all her own. Beyond being the best-selling female hip hop artist to date, and often referred to as the queen of hip hop, what separates Missy Elliott is her ability to allow her aesthetic to speak for itself. She uses her artistry to transcend cultural norms in hip hop and in the music industry. In hip hop, women have had to be hard (excessively masculine) or rely on overt sexuality. Missy, on the other hand, showcases a quirky, edgy, unconventional, and
progressive aesthetic that pushes the boundaries of hip hop, transcending prescribed genre norms. In addition, Elliott has created a powerful digital identity that allows her to transcend the normative gaze foisted upon female artists. Just as Michael Jackson transcended being labeled another “black artist” in the 1980s, Missy has overcome the trappings of the usual feminine images of women in hip hop.

Melissa Arnette Elliott, who would single-handedly redefine the notion of a female hip hop artist, was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, on July 1, 1971. She credits her mother, Patricia Elliott, a survivor of domestic violence, with fostering in her a sense of strength and courage that helped define her career path. As an only child, Missy, nicknamed by her mother, spent countless hours listening to music to escape the abuse her mother suffered at the hands of her father. As early as age four, Missy sang and wrote songs to express her feelings and escape the harsh realities of her home. She would isolate herself in her room and sing to her dolls.

The family lived for a brief time in Jacksonville, North Carolina, while Missy’s father, Ronnie Elliott, was an enlisted Marine. The family then returned to Virginia, where their poor quality of life reflected the reality of many African Americans during that time. Her mother was a woman of faith and quite protective of her daughter, rarely letting her out of her sight. Elliott also stayed close to home in fear that her mother would be beaten or even killed in her absence. The daily atmosphere in the home was unpredictable. In moments of desperation, Elliott even wrote numerous letters to pop stars with dreams of being rescued from her difficult life of abuse and poverty, among them Diana Ross and Michael and Janet Jackson. She made up stories about being handicapped, hoping to attract someone’s attention. As she became increasingly isolated, music became her refuge.

For Elliott, this time alone forged a deep connection with music and with her imagination. For most of her childhood she found hope in music, listening to the radio, playing records, and watching music videos and TV shows like American Bandstand and Soul Train. Although she was identified scholastically as a gifted child, a school official insisted she be tested twice, doubting the initial IQ score was accurate. Still, her grades suffered. She would often neglect homework to spend most of her time practicing dance moves and singing along with her favorite artists’ records. Elliott knew every dance move from Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video. She performed for her family members at picnics; she was placed on a table and would dance and sing for her family and friends. At home, she opted to stand on trash cans outside, using a hairbrush as a microphone. Eventually her relationship with music provided an important aspect of her aesthetic: her desire to create music that offered an entrée for others into her playful world of escape, hope, and joy.

Her early interest in music developed into a passion and a vocation that she acknowledged as a gift from God. Even so, the turning point in her life occurred when her mother mustered the strength to leave her father.
For Elliott, her mother’s strength as a single parent changed her life. The now “fearless” thirteen-year-old, though still deeply impoverished, felt at home with her dream of becoming an artist. Imbued with her mother’s iron will and her own active imagination, Elliott embarked on a musical journey that led to the top of the charts, redefining the boundaries of hip hop.

Although Elliott had dreamed of becoming an entertainer, she was not convinced there was a place for her in the industry. As a young woman, she felt alienated, especially since she rarely saw images that reflected her body type in the media. She was also rejected by record executives who viewed her as overweight and outside of market standards. Among other things, the rap and hip hop industry was still in its nascent form, featuring prominent male artists like Run-DMC, Big Daddy Kane, Kool Moe Dee, Doug E. Fresh, LL Cool J, and the Beastie Boys. In the late 1980s, however, Missy began to envision a place for herself in the industry. She was inspired by Salt-N-Pepa, a hot female rap group from New York. Their longevity as female artists in a male-dominated genre encouraged Missy to pursue her dream with more fervor.

Salt-N-Pepa also helped Elliott realize the importance of relying on her talent rather than copying others. They reinforced what she sensed from childhood. From childhood she viewed herself as distinctive, an original. She believed her talent was second to none and capable of opening industry doors. Other female MCs like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Monie Love, and Roxanne Shanté began to make inroads, building Elliott’s confidence. She honed her vocal talent by singing in the church choir with her mother and started entering and winning talent shows, enlisting friends to help her. Her public persona as an artist began to emerge.

THE ROAD TO MISSY “MISDEMEANOR” ELLIOTT

Believing female artists now had an opportunity to stand out in the male-dominated landscape, Elliott formed an R&B girl group called Sista after graduating from high school in 1990. She wanted to create a genuinely talented group with longevity, eschewing the music industry’s notion that one’s body type should be a primary factor when scouting talent. Elliott, after a series of auditions, found Chonita Coleman, LaShawn Shellman, and Radiah Scott, and the four began developing a unique sound by performing as a group in local talent shows. She partnered with Timothy “DJ Timmy Tim” Mosley, a neighborhood friend and local track master. She used this collaboration to create a new sound for her dream girl group. Mosley, serving as producer, and Elliott, as singer-songwriter, created original material for demo tracks.

Elliott’s first big break came in 1991 via Donald “Devante Swing” DeGrate, a singer-songwriter and primary producer of Jodeci (the hot R&B
act with Uptown Records, Elektra), whose debut album went double plati-
num. In a backstage impromptu audition, Sista performed a cappella for
DeGrate and within a few days Elliott and Sista moved to New York City
and signed with Elektra Records on DeGrate’s Swing Mod label. Sista became
the opening act for Jodeci and released “Brand New,” a single slated for their
upcoming project. The quartet was originally called Fay-Z but changed their
name after landing their contract. Elliott, who was fiercely loyal, took along
with her Mosley, later nicknamed Timbaland by DeGrate, and their friend,
rapper Melvin “Magoo” Barcliff. Elliott and Mosley’s partnership would
soon prove to be a musical partnership for hip hop history.

Elliott’s first project was a dream come true but more demanding than she
could anticipate. It was the point of departure for demonstrating her extroa-
dordinary productivity and work ethic. While working and writing material for
Sista’s first album, 4 All the Sistas Around the World, Elliott also contributed
songwriting duties, both credited and uncredited, to Jodeci’s next two al-
bums: Diary of a Mad Band (1993) and The Show, the After Party, the Hotel
(1995). In the midst of these endeavors, Elliott’s dream was temporarily
interrupted when Sista’s LP, finally completed in 1994, was shelved and
never released due to a financial upheaval at Uptown Records. Sista soon
was defunct. Though disappointed by the abrupt end to a multiyear labor
of love, Elliott remained hopeful.

For the next few years, Elliott lived as a starving artist in a two-story house
in Hackensack, New Jersey, with a large cohort of other artists from Swing
Mob all hoping to develop their own projects under DeGrate’s tutelage. In-
cluded among them were future R&B stars Ginuwine and Charlene “Tweet”
Keys. Ginuwine signed with Elektra the same day Sista did and Elliott con-
tributed two songs to his platinum-selling debut album. Tweet, formerly a
member of the R&B quintet Sugah, later signed with Elliott’s label, and Playa,
an R&B trio from Kentucky.

By 1995, Swing Mob had folded and many of its members dispersed. Elliott
and several Swing Mob members remained creative partners and continued to
live together, collaborating on each other’s projects. The group referred to
themselves collectively as “Supafriends” or “Da Bassment” while under De-
Grate’s label. Elliott and Mosley, however, began to acquire an impressive
roster of hits, and music executives in R&B and hip hop circles began to take
notice. Before long, Elliott had a burgeoning career behind the scenes as a
songwriter-producer. Her first professional credit as a songwriter was for the
1993 hit, “That’s What Little Girls Are Made Of,” for The Cosby Show’s
child star Raven-Symoné.

Despite all this, the music industry did not significantly respond until Elliott
and Mosley wrote and produced a string of hit tracks for Jodeci (“Sweaty,”
“Want Some More,” and “Won’t Waste Your Time”) and, most notably,
tracks for Aaliyah’s double-platinum sophomore album, One in a Million
(1996). This album consisted of several hit singles, including “If Your Girl
Only Knew,” “One in a Million,” “Hot Like Fire,” and “4 Page Letter.” The work on Aaliyah’s LP made the Elliott-Mosley songwriting-production team stars. They crafted hit after hit in a concentrated period of time for several artists, among them SWV (“Can We?”) and 702 (“Steeelo”). Mosley (Timbaland) gained individual attention after producing 702’s “Steeelo” remix.

During this time, Elliott gained street credibility as a performer after her breakthrough guest performances on MC Lyte’s 1996 single “Cold Rock a Party (Remix),” and on Gina Thompson’s “The Things You Do,” both of which were produced by Sean “Diddy” Combs. Her characteristically distinct and witty rhyme, featured on Thompson’s track and video, garnered her the moniker Hee Haw Girl. Though she remained relatively unknown, people began to stop her in the streets and ask her if she was the Hee Haw Girl, requesting her to laugh and dance in the same manner she performed in Thompson’s video. Elliott’s trademark laugh and playful rhymes created an audience that openly embraced her. Industry heavyweights soon began court ing her to write, produce, and perform on their tracks.

After her performance on Thompson’s track, Elliott’s talent as an artist finally convinced music execs that her unconventional style and image had a place in mainstream music. Elliott was finally rewarded after a decade of unrelenting perseverance and multiple behind-the-scenes successes. She was able to enter the image-centric music industry on her own terms: a talented, dark-skinned, fingerwave-wearing, overweight, and—by industry standards—over-the-hill twenty-four-year-old. Her now-svelte five-foot frame has graced the cover of several prestigious magazines. In 2000, Elliott shed more than seventy pounds in less than a year to reduce her high blood pressure after her mother suffered a near-fatal heart attack. Elliott had received a doctor’s warning about her significantly reduced life expectancy if she did not lose weight and take better care of herself. Elliott, who is notorious for being a workaholic, responded.

Elliott soon had multiple opportunities and several impressive offers. At twenty-two years of age, she accepted and signed a production/label deal with Elektra Entertainment Group in 1996. Under Goldmind, Inc., she was given complete creative control, but she was initially reluctant about entering the market as a solo artist; she desired to spend most of her time in the studio writing. Elliott and Timbaland returned to Virginia and continued producing tracks for other artists such as Total (“What About Us,” 1997) and scouting for new talent to help launch her new label. Even with peer pressure and a great deal of encouragement from her newly acquired fans, Elliott did not record her own work until she felt prepared.

After about a year in her new venture, Elliott enlisted Mosley to collaborate with her on her long-awaited solo project. With this record she became Goldmind’s first act and it became the first solo collaboration with Timbaland, who has subsequently partnered with Elliott on all her projects to date. The production duo reportedly completed the LP in one week, releasing her
groundbreaking debut *Supa Dupa Fly* in June 1997 to critical acclaim, which entered the genre-defying singer-lyricist Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliott into contemporary American music history. The album debuted on Billboard’s R&B Hip-Hop Albums chart at number three, the highest debut for a female hip hop artist. By September, *Supa Dupa Fly* was certified platinum. Elliott also became the first female hip hop artist to perform on the renowned Lilith Fair Tour (1998) and later with the Jay-Z/50 Cent “Rock the Mic” Tour.

The first single, “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly),” helped establish Elliott as an iconic figure. The video was directed by Hype Williams and touted as one of the most innovative videos of the year. The short was nominated for three MTV awards and won two Billboard Video Music Awards. *Rolling Stone* named Elliott the Best Rap Artist of the Year and “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” the Best Video of the Year. In December 1999, MTV ranked “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” as the fifteenth greatest video of all time; it has been featured on MTV’s 100 Greatest Videos Ever Made.

Shortly after the release of her debut, Elliott, who is often characterized as shy and unassuming, began speaking out about her childhood, astonishing her mother. Becoming the spokesperson for Break the Cycle (a nonprofit organization whose mission is to end domestic violence by working proactively with youth) was the beginning of her long-standing commitment to important humanitarian efforts, especially for women. Teaming up with model Iman in 1999, she created a line of lipstick called Misdemeanor, donating more than $1 million of the proceeds to Break the Cycle. During this time, Elliott began to share vivid memories of the abuse she and her mother experienced. Although her mother never intended to speak publicly about that chapter of their lives, she supported Elliott in her endeavors. She also began speaking publicly about the sexual molestation she suffered when she was eight years old. A teenage cousin raped her repeatedly for about a year until another relative caught him. Regarding her father, Elliott reportedly is in intermittent contact with him, and although she is still haunted by the memories, she believes she has moved beyond the pain toward healing.

She continues to avidly support work designed to help important contemporary issues. In 2002, she was a featured act in *Vanity Fair*’s In Concert series (“Where My Girls At”), a benefit concert in partnership with the Step Up Women’s Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening community resources for women and girls. The organization raises awareness and funding for breast cancer research and other women’s causes. The concert event was also a musical celebration honoring Elliott’s longtime friend Aaliyah, who died in the Bahamas in a plane crash in August 2001. Elliott also performed at MTV’s World AIDS Day concert, raising awareness about the growing crisis in South Africa and around the world.

The little girl who used to tell her mother she was going to be a star is now known as the first African American female, Grammy Award-winning, multiplatinum artist-producer and music executive. Though often described
as a consummate professional, she discusses the perils of being a businesswoman in the corporate arena on her second solo release, Da Real World. Beyond her success as an executive, her ability to continue to break new ground with each of her subsequent solo recordings makes her one of the most original artists in the last decade, a pioneer and visionary. Like Bessie Smith, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Mahalia Jackson, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, Chaka Khan, Michael Jackson, and Prince, among others, who created new borders in their respective genres, Elliott has provided new space for contemporary hip hop artists to explore. By fusing R&B, hip hop, rock, soul, and funk elements, Elliott and Mosley’s revolutionary work expanded the borders of the once-fledgling genre. Their individual production discographies are quite expansive.

Elliott and Mosley, in the midst of both of their own solo careers, continue to produce hit singles and albums for other artists, such as Janet Jackson, Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Destiny’s Child, Christina Aguilera, Justin Timberlake, Mel B, Monica, Lil’ Kim, Eminem, Nelly Furtado, Fantasia, Ciara, and protégés Nicole Wray and Tweet, to name a few. Mosley now manages his own label with Interscope Records called Mosley Music Group. In 2004, Elliott moved Goldmind from Elektra Entertainment Group to Atlanta Records, where she continues to develop her artist roster. Broadening her production efforts, she coscored the Disney/Touchstone Pictures film Stick It, and released “We Run This,” a single from the soundtrack.

Elliott is now a bankable commodity, and she has been featured in numerous multimillion-dollar ad campaigns from soft drinks to diamond jewelry. She is the first female hip hop artist ever to appear in a Gap commercial (2003), in which she was featured together with Madonna. In 2004 she appeared with Madonna, Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera in the controversial opener of the MTV Video Music Awards at New York’s Radio City Music Hall. She was nominated for eight awards. Elliott also appeared in ads for Vanilla Coke, MAC Cosmetics, Chrysler/Jeep, and Garrard & Co. jewelers.

Some of her latest ventures include an Adidas-sponsored clothing line with shoes and accessories called Respect M.E. and a reality series with UPN called The Road to Stardom with Missy Elliott. She enters the reality show market with other pop stars, including Blink 182’s Travis Barker, INXS, Tommy Lee, and TLC (see sidebar: Hip Hop and Reality Television). The Road to Stardom premiered January 5, 2005 and followed thirteen aspiring R&B and hip hop artists ranging from nineteen to twenty-nine years old. Elliott served as co-executive producer and judge. Jessica Betts, who won a cash prize and a record deal with Elliott’s label, released her album in 2006. Following Eminem’s and 50 Cent’s lead, the story of Elliott’s life will be featured in a biopic being developed by Universal Pictures. Robert De Niro and Jane Rosenthal have signed on as producers for the motion picture, and Diane Houston will serve as writer-director for the film.
MISSY’S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS TO HIP HOP

Missy Elliott is an important songwriter, perhaps the most innovative and prolific African American female songwriter in contemporary American music. Her unique ability to capture and communicate complex relationships in everyday parlance, while at the same time including subtleties that are difficult to articulate, especially in song, is uncanny. While most rap and hip hop artists discussed the perils of street life, as in gangsta rap, Elliott entered the conversation with a palpable truth that resonated with her audience. Her innovation is exhibited in her cadence, lyrical content and structure, mixture of singing and rapping, and willingness to discuss taboo subjects. She is characterized as a risk taker, sonically and visually. She pushes the envelope without apology and is able to produce evocative critical work.
During her time with Swing Mob, Elliott honed her talents and acquired a keen personal voice. As a songwriter and producer, she formulated a dual role: to create music that provides a temporary escape from personal issues (i.e. dance music) and to raise valuable questions about life and artistry without moralizing. This dialectic allows for a type of critical space that allows one to face problems without becoming immobilized by them. Her personal experiences have sharpened two important developmental skills: critical self-reflection and her ability to learn from observing others. She channels her personal knowledge of social problems into humorous dance tracks and melodic airy ballads. Her quirky and somewhat self-conscious conversation about sexuality also makes her material seem less threatening. Her sexually provocative and politically charged material invites her listeners into a dialogue while at the same time disarming them.

Like a blues woman singing in a juke joint hidden in the middle of a Louisiana bayou in the early twentieth century, Elliott airs her woes of love and loss, sexual desire, personal conflict, and feelings of female empowerment. She speaks the once private and forbidden thoughts of women. The tragicomic nature of her songs lifts once-unthinkable topics to speakable space. Though at times she blushes at her own candor and use of expletives, she cites her relationship with God as a point of inner conflict. She still feels comfortable with her subject matter and in her honesty, though she has admittedly tried to eliminate the use of profanity in her lyrics. She appears conflicted about her inability to do so. Still, her honesty lends itself to an open dialogue about common issues in life, primarily personal relationships. Rather than creating a false representation about a life she does not know for the sake of commercialism, Elliott broaches subjects that ring true for her. She gives her audience the opportunity to scrutinize her credibility. Her exploration of loss and dispossession and concomitant survival sets a cathartic feminine space, communicating her personal message of strength and empowerment.

In addition to the subtle and profound themes, Elliott’s style has distinct and identifiable characteristics. Like a jazz musician, Elliott first introduces a motif, riffing and improvising around it. The structure and language of her rhymes are tight pithy clusters of thought that relate various scenarios. She then uses short statements and simple concrete language to construct the bulk of her storytelling. Her sparse use of definite articles creates short staccato lines, which complement Mosley’s rhythm tracks. She even plays with the balance between connotation and denotation, using allusions to give depth to her tight diction. She also plays with patterns of sound and perception of sound and pauses. The use of internal rhyme adds weight or airiness to a given line, often repeating phrases. Known for her rich sensory detail that evokes sounds more than pictures, she onomatopoeically imitates sounds associated with experiences (vroom, beep, blat). This thematic approach to her work gives each of her albums unity and a unique voice. It also allows
for that characteristic playfulness of the one formerly known as the Hee Haw Girl.

As a rapper and singer, Elliott experiments with tone and delivery, emphasizing the unique aspect of each song. She communicates through rhythm, pitch, tone, and inflection. She uses her speaking voice like an instrument, varying between a smooth relaxed delivery and a squeezed higher timbre. She also incorporates slurred intonation, like a jazz trombone player, bending and sliding tones in a given line. At times, she operates below conventional linguistic structures to convey her feelings (grunts, moans, and hums). Rhythm in her work plays with patterns of sounds, rhyming phrases, alliterated consonants, and vowel sounds. She uses pauses and variations in pitch and intonation to add meaning and drama to her delivery. The movement of her tracks creates a unique and distinguishable style and composition. Her sultry, soulful alto voice also reinforces the uncomplicated melodic hooks, frequently layered in harmony. Rather than sampling vocals, she sings her vocal hooks live all the way down each track to add new texture to each refrain.

Elliott has managed to stay ahead of trends. She credits her partnership with Mosley and now, ironically, her self-imposed distance from listening to the radio. Though deeply influenced by old-school hip hop pioneers, Elliott and Mosley’s music dictum is to “make it new.” She also often credits Mosley for providing the necessary diversity and creative fodder she needs to make each project new and innovative. Their extensive body of work marks a noticeable shift in R&B and hip hop, making the two genres less distinguishable. The duo also marks a turning point in the ubiquitous use of sample-driven tracks. Mosley’s staccato beats and eclectic use of ambient sounds from world music help define a new direction in American popular music. His sound, initially reserved for Elliott and close collaborators, is now sampled and copied by many in the industry.

THE ALBUMS

*Supa Dupa Fly* (1997)

Elliott released her debut LP, *Supa Dupa Fly*, in July 1997, which included the hit single “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” that introduced Elliott to radio and television airwaves. The genre-blurring material was received with mostly high praise for its innovation. The disc is still ranked as the highest debut for a female hip hop artist on the Billboard charts, peaking at number three in its first week of release. The follow-up single was “Sock It to Me,” a moderate success charting in the pop Top 20 and Top 40, which was certified gold, featuring Lil’ Kim and Da Brat. The subsequent singles were “Beep Me 911,” featuring Timbaland, Magoo, and 702; and “Hit ’Em wit da Hee,” featuring Timbaland, Lil’ Kim, and Mocha. The album also featured other hip hop and
R&B artists such as Busta Rhymes, Aaliyah, and Ginuwine. The debut was certified platinum and nominated for two Grammy Awards for Best Rap Album and Best Rap Solo performance, “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly).” Among the several accolades the album received, Spin magazine ranked Supa Dupa Fly number nine in their Top 20 Albums of the Year and Rolling Stone named Elliott Best Rap Artist of the Year.

The lyrical content of the album reveals Elliott’s complex, creative, and challenging discussion about womanhood; her demand for respect, respect for her personal voice and her desire for fulfilling intimacy with lovers and friends. The album alternates between these two primary subjects. The production features Mosley’s signature rhythms, similar to dance hall beats, and midtempo funky bass-heavy grooves. Supa Dupa Fly opens up with an interlude featuring Busta Rhmyes as a town crier admonishing everyone to be attentive so they will not miss the historical event about to unfold. Through storytelling Elliott presents her discourse.

The first track, “Hit ‘Em wit da Hee,” featuring Lil’ Kim, discloses the genesis of Elliott’s distinctive laugh. Songs like “I’m Talkin” and “Gettaway” declare that Elliott is prolific and the dynamic production duo will remain eminent in the hip hop food chain. The refrain in each song repeatedly reminds any potential competition of her stylistic originality and confident voice. “Beep Me 911” reveals a woman frustrated with her boyfriend, who refuses to level with her about his lack of commitment in the relationship. Though she changed her life to become the object of his affection, her intuition tells her she is being exploited sexually. Magoo, featured on the track, replies that her intuition is right. In “Best Friends,” a woman encourages another female friend to stop complaining about her unfulfilling relationship and simply move on with her life. Elliott, the voice of the supportive friend, refuses to listen to the complaints of her companion, viewing the act of listening as enabling. The same sentiment is echoed in “Don’t Be Commin’ (In My Face).” Elliott also critiques women who use their bodies for material gain in “Why You Hurt Me.” She views this action as self-hatred and likens that lifestyle to a bad song she no longer wants to hear.

In 1998 under Goldmind/Elektra, Elliott released protégé Nicole Wray’s debut, Make It Hot. Elliott and Mosley produced the album, releasing two singles, “Make It Hot” and “Eyes Better Not Wander.” The album was certified gold, reaching number nineteen on the R&B charts and forty-two on the U.S. charts. The same year, Elliott penned and produced for several other artists, including Spice Girl Mel B’s “I Want You Back” and songs for Whitney Houston’s My Love Is Your Love.

Da Real World (1999)

Missy released her sophomore effort in July 1999; Da Real World was produced by Mosley. The success of her debut and the multiple hit collaborations
with other artists—in such a short period of time—made creating a new project with a fresh sound challenging for Elliott. She reportedly spent two months in the studio writing and recording for the follow-up disc. The much-anticipated recording was certified platinum by February 2000 and nominated for a Grammy for Best Rap Album, among other honors. Da Real World showcases a range of style influences from reggae to underground hip hop.

*Da Real World* also features several top hip hop and R&B artists: Outkast’s Big Boi and Nicole Wray (“All N My Grill”), Aaliyah and Da Brat (“Sticking Chickens”), Beyoncé of Destiny’s Child (“Crazy Feelings”), Eminem (“Busa Rhyme”), Redman (“Dangerous Mouths”), Juvenile and B.G. (“U Can’t Resist”), Lady Saw (“Mr. DJ”), and Lil Mo (“You Don’t Know”) and interludes featuring Lil’ Kim. With so many guest appearances, the album could be considered a duets project. However, Elliott is able to make her presence the center of the production.

On this album, a more assertive and politically charged Elliott raises questions about power, race, and gender. She invites her critics and nay-saying competitors to a verbal joust. The first single, “She’s a Bitch,” sets the tone for the rest of the album. This song takes issue with the notion that for a man aggressive behavior is positive, but for a woman the same behavior is the object of criticism. The song suggests that strong, articulate, and assertive women should be accepted as normative. The chorus hurls the insult. The rest of the song replies that if success requires “masculine” behavior, she will perform the forbidden behavior and gladly accept the accompanying derision and label. The provocative song reclaims and reinvests the word *bitch*. She inverts its meaning, redefining it for self-confident women. Elliott says, “I am a bitch.”

Other singles included “All N My Grill” and “Hot Boyz,” which spent six weeks on the Billboard R&B/Hip-Hop chart. “Hot Boyz,” certified platinum, remained on the Billboard Rap Singles chart for almost an entire year, retaining the number one spot for eighteen consecutive weeks, breaking the previous eleven-week record (held by Da Brat, Coolio, and Puff Daddy aka Diddy). The single also hit number one on Billboard’s R&B Singles chart for six consecutive weeks.

**Miss E . . . So Addictive (2001)**

Elliott’s *Miss E . . . So Addictive*, released in May 2001, was hailed by critics as one of the best albums of the year, debuting at number two on the Billboard charts. Elliott was nominated for numerous prestigious awards, including a BET Award for Best Female Hip-Hop Artist. Inspired by Marvin Gaye’s *Sexual Healing*, Elliott delivers a contemporary conversation about female sexuality. She presents a realistic range of female sexuality by juxtaposing conventional and progressive ideas about intimacy and female sexual desire.
She upends the notion that frank sexual talk is reserved only for socially marginalized women. In the opening interlude, Elliott invites her audience to get lost in the funky new beats and sound that she and Mosley deliver, a retro feel with an edgy contemporary flavor.

The album produced four singles that carried her third release well into 2002. The single “One Minute Man,” featuring Ludacris and Jay-Z on the remix, produced the megahit for the album, entering the Billboard Top 20. The song was nominated for six MTV Video Awards for Best Hip-Hop Video, Best Direction (Dave Myers), Best Cinematography (Karsten Gopinath), Best Art Direction (Mike Martella), Best Editing (Jay Robinson), and Best Special Effects (Marc Varisco and Nathan McGuinness). The recording and the video engage both male and female perspectives on this taboo subject. The Indian-influenced “Get Ur Freak On” and the remix featuring Nelly Furtado were equally successful, earning Elliott her first Grammy Award for Best Rap Solo Performance. The remix was featured on the Lara Croft: Tomb Raider soundtrack and was heard in the motion picture. “4 My People” became the club anthem from the album, both domestically and internationally. “Scream a.k.a. Itchin’” earned Elliott her second Grammy Award for Best Rap Solo Performance.

“Take Away” was a moderate success, which featured Ginuwine and introduced Elliott’s new protégé and label mate, Tweet. Tweet released her debut, Southern Hummingbird, in April 2002 to rave reviews. In 1999, after leaving the Swing Mob and Sugah’s failed attempts at musical success, Tweet became despondent and contemplated suicide. Tweet credits Elliott with saving her life, calling her a guardian angel. Elliott called Tweet to invite her to work on So Addictive the day before Tweet planned to end her life.

Elliott includes a religious presence on the album that continues to point to her spiritual sensitivity; she does not separate her faith from her artistry. On a hidden track, her smooth mellow vocals accompany Yolanda Adams, Mary Mary, and the legendary members of the Clark Sisters on “Movin’ On.” The preceding spoken interlude and song illustrate Elliott’s belief in God’s forgiveness and her need to look forward rather than dwelling on the past. She acknowledges her humanity and reliance on God’s presence in her life despite the criticism from others; she declares that though some misunderstand her work, her faith is a constant source of strength and presence in her artistry. Busta Rhymes, Da Brat, Eve, Ginuwine, Method Man, Redman, Lil Mo, and Mosley aka Timbaland are other So Addictive contributors.

The same year, Elliott was featured on Janet Jackson’s “Son of a Gun” remix with Carly Simon and served as producer on a cover of Patti LaBelle’s 1975 hit “Lady Marmalade” featuring Christina Aguilera, Mya, Pink and Lil’ Kim. The song and video became the biggest single of 2001 (domestic and international), selling 5.2 million units and winning a Grammy Award for Best Pop Collaboration with Vocal.
**Under Construction (2002)**

Elliott’s fourth album, *Under Construction*, is her best-selling album to date, moving nearly 3.5 million units worldwide and being certified platinum within a month of its November 2002 release. “Work It” spent ten consecutive weeks at number two on the Hot 100 and VH1 ranked the single number seventy-seven on *VH1: 100 Best Songs of the Past 25 Years*. On this disc, Elliott and Mosley continue their “make it new” production philosophy by borrowing elements from early hip hop. Critics recognized that the album offers a new palette for hip hop and deemed the duo successful. Elliott utilizes her lower vocal register, layering harmony beds with rich dark octaves, adding to the soulful nostalgic sound of the album. She teamed up with Method Man (“Bring the Pain”), Ludacris (“Gossip Folks”), Jay-Z (“Back in the Day”), Ms. Jade (“Funky Fresh Dressed”), Beyoncé Knowles (“Nothing Out There for Me”), and TLC (“Can You Hear Me”). The celebratory nature of the album was well received by fans and critics alike. Elliott’s honors included an American Music Award for Favorite Rap/Hip-Hop Female Artist, a BET Award for Best Hip-Hop Artist, and her third Grammy Award for Best Female Rap Solo Performance for “Work It.” The album was nominated for Album of the Year, Best Rap Album, and Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group for “Gossip Folks” at the 2004 Grammys.

Elliott was deeply affected by personal losses, the death of her close friends Aaliyah and Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes, and the tragedy of September 11, 2001. These events caused her to become more reflective about her own life and her position in the industry. *Under Construction* is her attempt to bridge gaps in the hip hop community. The album literally fuses the old with the new by utilizing retro beats, electro-stylization, allusions, and direct quotes from iconic old-school recordings, making the old progressive and new. It is a veritable homage to hip hop. She encourages her peers to take back hip hop, and love it and nurture it rather than exploiting it. The title is symbolic of her life, her artistry, and the world itself as a work in progress.

Elliott still considers music a refuge. “Can You Hear Me,” a duet with TLC, transports the listener back to moments and days right after Aaliyah’s death when her family began making arrangements for the funeral. Elliott paints a vivid picture of the pain and desire to make sense of her friend’s death. Her grief and concern for Aaliyah’s family are representative of her same concern for the loss of Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes of TLC, who died in a car crash in 2002. This cathartic space is extended to the families still grieving, as a lasting memoriam and celebration of their artistry (see sidebar: TLC).

*Under Construction* was nominated for Album of the Year for the 2004 Grammy Awards and for Best Rap Album. The song “Gossip Folks” was nominated for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group. “Work It” was nominated for Best Rap Song and won for Best Female Rap Solo Performance. Elliott also won two Lady of Soul Awards, for Best Song of the Year.
TLC
Jennifer R. Young

TLC, an R&B trio composed of Tionne “T-Boz” Watkins, rapper Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes, and Rozanda “Chilli” Thomas, formed in 1991 and joined LaFace Records that same year. Their debut album, *Oooooooh ... On the TLC Tip* was released a year later, going gold and platinum within months. Their three other albums, *CrazySexyCool* (1994), *Fanmail* (1999), and *3D* (2002) also sold well. The Grammy Award-winning albums *Crazy and Fanmail* have gone megaplatinum numerous times over; *3D* has gone platinum. Left Eye also released a solo album, *Supernova* (2001). TLC is one of the first groups that regularly combined singing, dancing, and rapping.

Other R&B groups in the early 1990s like Jodeci, Mary J. Blige, and Total had guest appearances from rappers on their singles. However, TLC raised the stakes by being a multigenre group; their songs are a combination of rap, R&B, funk, blues, and rock and roll. Their choreography, song harmony, and thematic appearance give the trio a unique identity that audiences with different tastes favor. TLC is also one of the groups that should be credited for their influence on the music industry overall. Noticing the success of TLC’s albums going platinum and receiving critical acclaim, producers and artists began incorporating more rap into the remix versions of R&B songs. This trend changed the nature of music in both popular culture and hip hop culture.

Their first album had three songs that set a new precedent: “Ain’t 2 Proud 2 Beg,” “Baby, Baby, Baby,” and “What About Your Friends.” Instead of being an R&B group that only sang standard love songs, TLC rhymed about sex, romance, womanhood, and sisterhood. Their debut single, “Ain’t 2 Proud 2 Beg,” was an upbeat song about sexual liberation. The music video also promoted safer sex as Left Eye wore a wrapped condom packet on her left eye and T-Boz and Chilli wore condom packets on their clothes. In a time when the lyrical content of music was becoming more graphic, TLC was noticed for their female perspective on sexual desire and conquest.

Similar to something blueswoman Bessie Smith might have sung, “Ain’t 2 Proud 2 Beg” positions women as the gazers and men as their objects. TLC continues this trend with songs like “Creep,” “Red Light Special,” and “Scrubs.” TLC celebrates women and encourages them to love men and to demand respect from their men and from themselves. Songs like “Waterfalls,” “Unpretty,” and “Damaged” discuss physical, mental, and emotional health. The song “Waterfalls” contains uncommon subjects such as promiscuity, incarceration, family crisis, and HIV/AIDS. “Unpretty” challenges societal notions of beauty. The music video has its characters contemplating face lifts, breast augmentation, drastic diets, and other types of body alterations. “Damaged” gets into the psychological effects that physical and emotional abuse can have on a woman’s life. TLC is popular not only for their party anthem
songs, but also songs that address profound issues. The group has endured numerous personal troubles, having to file for bankruptcy in the late 1990s, enduring public scrutiny during their interpersonal struggles as a trio, and withstanding the loss of Left Eye, who died in a car accident in Honduras in August 2002.

and Best Video, and won two of eight MTV Video Music Awards nominations for Best Hip-Hop Video and the coveted Video of the Year.

This Is Not a Test! (2003)

Debuting in November 2003 at number thirteen on the Billboard 200 chart, This Is Not a Test! earned Elliott her fifth consecutive platinum album, selling 144,000 copies in its first week of release. The album incorporates a range of genres, integrating early rap (“Wake Up” featuring Jay-Z), dance hall (“Keep It Movin’” featuring Elephant Man), and R&B (“I’m Not Perfect,” featuring the Clark Sisters). The album declares that this recording is an authentic representation of hip hop and encourages other artists to move away from commercialism (gimmicks) and return to true artistry.

Elliott’s singles were “Pass That Dutch” and “I’m Really Hot,” which was nominated for two MTV Video Awards for Best Dance Video and Best Choreography (see sidebar: B-Boys and Break Dancers). On this recording she officially drops “Misdemeanor,” the nickname she received from a childhood disc jockey who claimed that Elliott’s style was unlawful. She earned a Radio Music Award nomination for Artist of the Year Hip-Hop Radio, among other accolades.

The same year, she appeared on the cover of Rolling Stone’s October issue with Alicia Keys and Eva Pigford (Tyra Banks’s America’s Next Top Model winner) and performed on the venerable Saturday Night Live broadcast. She was also featured on two singles, Wyclef Jean’s “Party to Damascus” and Ghostface Killah’s “Tush.” In 2004, Elliott collaborated with Christina Aguilera on the remake of “Car Wash” featured on the Shark Tale motion picture soundtrack and The Fighting Temptations soundtrack featuring Beyoncé Knowles, MC Lyte, and Free. In addition to making her acting debut as a costar in the motion picture Honey, starring Jessica Alba, she joined the Ladies First Tour alongside Alicia Keys and Beyoncé Knowles. Elliott ended the year on top with her appearance on Ciara’s Billboard Top 10 single “1, 2 Step.”

The Cookbook (2005)

Elliott released her sixth album, The Cookbook, in July 2005, which debuted at number two on the Billboard 200, selling 176,000 copies in the first
B-Boys and Break Dancers
Mickey Hess

Dance, as one of hip hop’s vital four elements of MCing, DJing, graffiti writing, and b-Boying, has always been central to the culture. When hip hop music began with Kool Herc’s creation of the breakbeat, the b-boys and b-girls took to the dance floor. In fact, before MCs began to say rhymes over the beat, they worked as hype men to help the DJ draw people onto the dance floor. The term b-boy, still used to designate a hip hop dancer, derives from “break boy,” and the term break dancer also derives from the “break,” Kool Herc’s isolation and repetition of key instrumental breaks in funk, jazz, R&B, and soul records. Early New York City b-boy crews like the Rocksteady Crew, Floor Masters, Dynasty Rockers, and the Disco Kids faced off in dance competitions much like MCs would come to do with rhymes. Legendary breakers like Ken Swift, Crazy Legs, and Frosty Freeze propelled b-Boying into worldwide fame as breakdancing.

Because the dance moves and fashion styles of these b-boy crews added a dynamic visual element to hip hop music, b-Boying was featured prominently in films, from the documentary *Style Wars* to the movies *Wild Style*, *Beat Street*, and *Flashdance*. While New York City had its b-boys and b-girls, Los Angeles had poppers and lockers. LA dancers were given their own coverage in the films *Breakin’* and *Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo*. Break dancing became a popular umbrella term for New York and LA dance styles, including flashy moves like head spins and back spins that drew attention to hip hop dance in the 1980s. Break dancers were featured in films and on television talk shows. They performed for Queen Elizabeth and were showcased at the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. The sudden and overwhelming popularity of break dancing made b-Boying seem like a symptom of hip hop culture’s entrance into mainstream culture. As break dancing’s popularity grew in the mainstream, hip hop artists began to turn their backs on the flashy spectacle seen in Hollywood versions of hip hop culture, and break dancing lost its centrality to hip hop, making a return in the late 1990s within a burgeoning underground hip hop culture that sought to return to hip hop’s old school roots.

Dance, however, did not leave the hip hop scene with break dancing’s overexposure. Artists like Big Daddy Kane, Salt-N-Pepa, MC Hammer, Redhead Kingpin, 3rd Bass, and Heavy D and the Boys made dance central to their performances. Biz Markie, Public Enemy’s Flavor Flav, and Ed Lover of Yo! MTV Raps created their own signature comic dances. Several hip hop dancers from this era went on to become MCs and hip hop singers: Tupac Shakur began his career as a dancer for the group Digital Underground, and the Fly Girls and Fly Guys who danced on the Fox comedy series *In Living Color* featured Jennifer Lopez and future members of the Pharcyde.

When pop rappers MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice scored multiplatinum album sales in the early 1990s using flashy costumes and dance moves, hip hop began
to experience a backlash against dance. With the popularity of West Coast gangsta rap throughout the mid to late 1990s, dance was relatively absent from hip hop videos. Dr. Dre, who did not dance in his videos, parodied the dance styles of his rivals Eazy-E and 2 Live Crew’s Luther Campbell in the music video for “Dre Day.” Dance returned to rap videos with releases from Bad Boy Records that featured Puff Daddy’s dance moves, and with Missy Elliott, whose videos featured innovative choreography and special effects.

Further Resources


week of release. By January 2006 the single “Lose Control” was certified triple platinum and had won two MTV Video awards for Best Dance Video and Best Hip-hop Video. The video was also was nominated for Breakthrough Video, Best Direction (Dave Meyer and Missy Elliott), Best Choreography, and Best Special Effects. The album was nominated for four Grammy Awards: Best Rap Album, Best Rap Song, Best Rap/Sung Collaboration, and Best Short Form Video for “Lose Control.”

Although considered an industry veteran and one of the most powerful and influential artists in contemporary music, Elliott, competing now with herself, found an innovative balance between her edgy experimental nature and respect for old-school hip hop. Each producer, performance, and guest appearance on the album helps develop the notion that The Cookbook is a recipe for hip hop success. After almost exclusively working with Mosley, the concept album features a variety of producers including the Neptunes, Warren Campbell, Craig X. Brockman, Rhemario Webber, and Elliott on “Lose Control,” featuring Ciara and Fat Man Scoop. Each track offers a distinct hip hop voice. While Mosley only produced two tracks on the album, “Partytime” and “Joy,” Elliott remained in contact with her longtime collaborator during the project’s development.

Elliott varies her rap lyrical delivery from track to track. For example, “On and On,” produced by Pharell of the Neptunes (one of the most sought-after contemporary producers and a childhood friend of Mosley’s), showcases a straightforward lyrical style absent Elliott’s characteristic ornamentation. The track earned the Neptunes a Grammy Award nomination for “Producer of the Year.” Rap pioneer Slick Rick joins Elliott on “Irresistible Delicious.” Elliott’s rap delivery on this track is a tribute to Rick, slurring over a
breakbeat track with lush harmonic vocals lacing the refrain. With Elliott as the Cookbook’s chef, she enlisted Mike Jones, Fantasia, M.I.A., Vybez Cartel, Mary J. Blige, and Grand Puba. Blige and Puba are on Elliott’s most personal track to date, “My Struggles,” produced by Qur’an H. Goodman. Elliott rhymes about how she witnessed her father’s abuse of her mother. The same year, Elliott participated in the Donate a Phone, Save a Life campaign sponsored by the Body Shop and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

In addition, her commercial stock rose considerably. She was selected to launch Chrysler/Jeep’s Commander, a new luxury sports utility vehicle, which would include an unprecedented multimedia campaign (television, Internet, and in-dealership). She also launched Yahoo!’s new music subscription service, was featured on the cover of Dub magazine, and appears in Vanity Fair’s coveted music issue.

THE VIDEOS

For a solo artist in any genre, visual imagery is an important aspect of marketing. Unfortunately, artists have to rely on music executives to approve their visual representation of their artistry. This tradition is especially detrimental for female artists. Women’s bodies are sexualized and become the primary prisms through which their art is visually represented and experienced by spectators. In hop hop, this representative situation is even more notorious for victimizing female artists and ubiquitous video vixens. Despite this practice, Elliott was able to break through and become arguably the most important video icon of the decade. As her own music executive, she trusted her intuition and remained open to experimentation. Her body, already an aberration in the industry (overweight and with distinctly African American features), is consequently considered “not marketable,” meaning not typically accepted as sexually alluring. Ironically, these differences provided an opportunity for her to transcend accepted norms.

As a result, Elliott was able to create a digital identity more in line with her artistic power and imagination. Her futuristic musical sensibilities are seamlessly translated visually without regard to stereotypical female representation in music videos. Just as her music is ahead of trends, her visual representation is revolutionary as well. Her consistent originality helped usher in a new visual era in music videos. Her fresh approach has made her a multimedia star and a new norm of beauty. Her solo videography, for instance, has merited video awards and honors from Billboard to the Grammy’s including twenty-five MTV Video Award nominations, being rivaled only by Madonna.

Elliott’s videography initially constructed a larger-than-life digital identity where she seemingly defied nature. The otherworldly and futuristic space Elliott inhabited helped her transcend industry stereotyping by helping her
to create powerful iconography. This cyberworld created a space absent a patriarchal system. The surreal imagery presented her as a powerful agent who commands the camera’s attention. In her video, she used her body to display power and sexuality on her own terms. By doing this, she portrayed superhuman characteristics—acting as a powerful lord who inhabits space disrupted normative discourse about her body and gender.

To illustrate, her first short film introduces her as a cartoon character. Her groundbreaking “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” video, directed by Hype Williams, hit the airwaves in May 1997, featuring cameos by Sean “Diddy” Combs, Total, and Lil’ Kim. The video catapulted Elliott into pop consciousness. Williams used a fish eye lens and wide angles to construct the exaggerated imagery. Elliott’s character has bulbous eyes, a black balloon suit, and full black lips, engaging spectators in her artistry rather than objectifying her sexuality.

Akin to a cartoon sequence, humorous images draw the spectator into her playful world. The video opens with her back to the audience in her black bubble suit. The first shot of her face reveals a beautiful smile as she laughs. This opening sequence introduces a woman who does not take herself too seriously, a woman willing to risk her reputation on her artistry. Most of the close-ups of the guest artists are playful, but Elliott’s face cannot be easily read. She is playful but coy. Her lips and eyes pop out like a Looney Tunes character to the rhythm of her track. Her body ticks and jerks to the same pulsating rhythms, bending and contorting. The setting is vibrant; the color palette consists of bright primary colors, which add to the playful tone. But throughout the entire video, a sexualized female body is not the focal point of the imagery.

In the video as a character she becomes a living cartoon, but more important, as an artist she transcends narrowly prescribed female representation. “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” is still considered one of the most important videos ever made. Elliott was rewarded with several coveted video honors for her efforts: Billboard Video Music Awards, Best New Artist Clip, Billboard Video Music Awards, Best Clip (Rap), Rolling Stone’s Best Music Video of the Year, and three MTV nominations for Breakthrough Video, Best Rap Video, and Best Direction. The awards attest to the importance of the groundbreaking video in the life of hip hop videography. The comparable follow-up “Sock It 2 Me,” also directed by Hype Williams, continued the animation theme. “Sock It 2 Me” is inspired by Mega Man, a video game published by Capcom in 1987 for the Nintendo Entertainment System.

In her next few videos, Elliott continued building her videography around this potent imagery. In the fantasy fairy-tale video “Beep Me 911,” directed by Earle Sebastian, Elliott is a doll that comes to life. This video continues the powerful imagery set up by the first two videos by creating an anti–fairy tale. Elliott plays several different dolls, including the most powerful doll, who dons a gold gown reminiscent of the flowing blue and white gown worn by
Disney’s Snow White. The video features Timbaland and Magoo, male dolls who cheat on their girlfriends by engaging in male sexual fantasy. 702, the R&B female trio also featured on the track, are also dolls that come to life. Throughout the video, the women use their sexuality to lure the men into close proximity in order to punish them for betrayal. The women are scantily dressed and wear fantasy clothes and hairstyles. Though the women are sexualized, they all use jerky doll movements emphasizing their fantasy existence, blinking their eyes without purpose. Elliott upends the typical fairy-tale ending. Instead of the prince and princess living together happily ever after, she destroys him because of his deception and willingness to live a double life (a reference to the song). Elliott, the giant gold princess doll, stomps on the diminutive men in their miniature car just as they try to make their getaway.

In addition to fairy tales, she also uses historic time periods to disrupt gendered ideology. “Hit ’Em wit da Hee,” directed by Paul Hunter, transports her back in time. The medieval set design provides the backdrop for Elliott to showcase her dance choreography. Elliott is presented in a gender-bending pin-striped suit and hat. The brim covers her face for most of her dance sequences. She is endowed with special powers that allow her and her companions to float through the air. Again, she is clearly the most powerful and central figure in this world. Her primary visual representation is male and evokes classic imagery generally associated with Michael Jackson. The tone and mood are mysterious, signifying that her style resists demystification.

Her classic example of this period in her videography is “She’s a Bitch,” directed by Hype Williams. This provocative video is considered the apex of her introductory period as an artist. In this futuristic video, Elliott’s androgyny personifies a conscious resistance against gender power relations. Elliott dons a black leather Grace Jones-like persona that is both male and female. Her charcoal-black body (painted), bald head, and warrior breastplate signify a powerful black she-male presence; a new representation for a female artist absent an intrusive sexualized male lens. The video introduces Elliott as the central figure in her surreal apocalyptic world. The camera lingers on her every move. She struts powerfully toward the camera as her long black leather coat flows in the wind behind her.

The opening sequence conjures up images of Shaft’s powerful strut down the dangerous New York streets as a fearless private detective. Elliott, however, wears her bullets on her vest and rhinestones around her eyes, making her look more feline. The close-up shots focus on her face as she speaks directly into the camera, boasting about her position of power, rubbing her bald head. In her insolence, each time she is called a bitch her arms rest around her head. The jerky movements call attention to the chorus. One of the most powerful images comes near the end of the video when she and her imps emerge from a black sea as dark clouds attest to her powerful presence in nature.

After this early period from 1997 through mid-1999, there is a noticeable shift in the imagery in her next few videos. The change reveals Elliott as
a more mature artist. Now firmly established as a visionary and a trendsetter, her visual imagery becomes more accessible—featuring more realistic settings and her signature throwback stylization, with dance choreography in the forefront of most video treatments. The spectator can easily compare his or her own existence to the images on the screen. Elliott is presented as a real person in a real world with real problems. “All N My Grill,” “Gossip Folks,” and “Take Away” present relatable worlds. In “All N My Grill,” she is a woman scorned but walks down the street and discusses her problem with her boyfriend in a car. She returns to high school and relives her fantasy of being the most popular girl on campus in “Gossip Folks.” In her most personal video, “Take Away,” she mourns the loss of her friend and collaborator Aaliyah.

However, Elliott still incorporates supernatural and otherworldly elements in her visual representation. She uses a combination of these two elements depending on the nature of the song. Some videos are completely realistic while others are not. For example, in “Hot Boyz,” Elliott is still self-possessed, but presented in an easygoing fashion; her sassy attitude and sensuality are displayed through the way she tilts her head and speaks out of the side of her mouth. This video is one of Elliott’s first straight performance videos. In this short, an industrial warehouse sets the backdrop for Elliott’s introduction as a female rap artist. Beauty shots are intercut between her performance shots. The set is a semicircle with three or four levels of metal scaffolding with partygoers peering through the beams. She stands on a high pedestal in the center of the crowd and performs directly for the camera. Here, Elliott exudes a quiet confidence. “Hot Boyz,” released in November 1999, features Nas, Eve, and Lil Mo. The video was well received and won a Soul Train Lady of Soul Award for Best R&B/Hi-Hop Soul or Rap Music Video.

On the other hand, “Get Ur Freak On,” “One Minute Man,” and “Work It” are concept videos that incorporate both realistic and surreal elements. Elliott does not, however, abandon her larger-than-life digital persona. Rather, she integrates the powerful persona into the real world. For most of “Get Ur Freak On,” Elliott inhabits a seething underworld where batlike creatures dwell, and she is able to stretch her neck out like a snake. She is comfortable and in charge. Above the earth she is a military commander holed up at a dilapidated mansion. Her troops dance behind her in military garb and combat boots as she hangs from a chandelier. She was rewarded again for her efforts with three MTV Video Music Award nominations for Video of the Year, Hip-Hop Video of the Year, and Best Female Video. She also won the Soul Train Lady of Soul Award for Best R&B/Soul or Rap Music Video.

Again in “One Minute Man,” one of her most sexually provocative videos to date, Elliott is still able to defy gravity and contort her body. Though most of the action takes place in the real world (a hotel), she is able to take her head off while her dismembered body dances. The video features Ludacris
and Trina, and was soon nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Music Video/Short Film. “One Minute Man” also garnered Elliott another MTV Video Music Award for Best Hip-Hop Video and Soul Train Lady of Soul Award for Best R&B/Soul or Rap Music Video. In “Work It,” she defies gravity, eats a car, spins on her head, and raps with bees on her face without being harmed.

Her latest videos are even subtler in her attempt to integrate her self-understanding with realistic imagery. The power and self-will exhibited in her early videos have been reduced to special effects, making them almost undetectable. For instance, in “Lose Control” and “We Run This,” Elliott uses special effects to present herself doing tasks that require professional training. In “We Run This,” released in February 2006, Elliott’s head is digitally placed on Dominique Dawes’s body. Elliott uses the Olympic gymnast’s body to perform extremely difficult balance beam and floor routines. In “Lose Control,” the first video released from the *Cookbook* album, Elliott uses a professional dancer’s body to perform advanced high-energy dance moves. “Lose Control” is primarily a dance video, which features a contemporary stylized rendition of the Lindy Hop, a dance made popular at Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom from the early 1930s through the mid-1940s. Elliott won her fifth Grammy Award for Short Form Music Video and two MTV Video Awards for Best Hip-Hop Video and Best Dance Video for “Lose Control.”

Since Total’s 1996 “What About Us,” Elliott has been featured in over forty-five videos. She continues to work with longtime video collaborators, directors Hype Williams and Dave Myers. Elliott, moreover, has helped create an identity for female rappers beyond hackneyed objectification. In addition to her musical contributions, her visual imagery makes her, arguably, the most important artist of the decade. She has created new space for male and female artists who take risks to be successful.

**A HIP HOP PIONEER**

Patricia Elliott wanted her daughter to pursue a career in gospel music. Though seemingly far from the pulpit of a church, Elliott has found a way to make a deep connection with her gospel roots by creating art that transcends hip hop and industry norms. She taps into the rich black vernacular tradition. Hip hop has always been a way for black youth culture to speak out about marginalization. However, Elliott goes beyond speaking about disempowerment; she constructs a world, a hopeful place where she finds refuge and freedom to express her individuality. Like slaves who, in the face of dehumanization, sang and hummed their lives into existence through spirituals, Elliott too declares her self-knowledge through her music. Her hermetic musical world helps her transcend her personal history and oppressive music industry norms.
This notion is visually represented in her “Work It” video when she declares that Kunta Kinte will never be a slave again. In one scene, a black slave refuses to say yes to his master and then slaps him in anger. When the slave slaps his white master’s face, he becomes black. The once-white man is now black but still dressed in his regal attire. The slave master begins to scream in dismay as he examines his new ebony hands. In this scene, Elliott explicitly declares that there has been a reversal of power and her art will never be held captive by anyone. She argues that if she embraces gimmicks and stereotypical hip hop lore about women, that action would be akin to a contemporary black slave obeying a white master.

Elliott has sustained a successful career that spans a range of artistic platforms. As a solo artist, her peers and critics respect her; from her frenetic stage presence to her retro-futuristic recordings, she innovates. She is, in fact, the only female singer-rapper, songwriter-producer, and music executive in contemporary American music. She is successful in each category. Moreover, in less than one decade, she has managed to become one of the most sought-after songwriters in the music industry. As a songwriter-producer, her song catalogue currently includes over 200 songs. Elliott’s vocal arrangements, rap performance, vocal performance, songwriting, and production are featured on hundreds of published recordings. In addition, Elliott is the only African American female record executive in history to produce hits for both herself and other artists she has collaborated with.

For Elliott, her reality is her artistry and as such she will continue to maintain a critical position in hip hop. Her primary contribution is her ongoing innovation. Elliott has been able to develop an aesthetic that transcends industry norms and hip hop conventions while at the same time remaining commercially relevant. Each of her albums moves in a new direction, challenging artists to create work that has its own originality and integrity. She is often quoted as saying music is her true love, and she is most herself in the studio. There she feels at peace. If that is the case, her consistent quality of work and enviable work ethic will indeed make her a legend.

FURTHER RESOURCES


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

This Is Not a Test! Elektra, 2003.
Icons are people whose abilities and talents are molded by the times, fashioned by the moment, and shaped by the past. Jay-Z, one of today’s most notable hip hop moguls, exemplifies these iconic virtues. Born on December 4, 1969, in Brooklyn, New York, Shawn Corey Carter (also known as Jigga, Hov—short for the Jewish name of God—Jehovah, Jay-Hova, Hova, and Young Hov) experienced one of the most significant and meteoric rises to success ever recorded in hip hop, having sold over 32 million albums.
Carter was the last of four children raised in a single-parent household by his mother, Gloria Carter. Carter grew up with little financial security, no father (his father, Adnis Reeves, left when he was twelve), and complete access to the streets he later became famous for rhyming about. Crime, drug dealing, and violence in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of New York in the 1980s was hardly unusual, nor were Carter’s experiences in Marcy Housing Projects, but how he articulated his experiences and perceptions to millions across the world was has made him an icon.

He attended high school for a brief period in New Jersey, and then dropped out. He also stopped drug dealing after several close brushes with death, helping him determine which vehicle to pour his creative energies into—his music or the streets. Carter’s early nickname, “Jazzy,” has been suggested to be an homage to the J-Z subway lines that travel from Manhattan to Brooklyn, poetically suggesting a link between uptown and downtown, a link of opposing cultures that one might see later in his life when he bridged underground and mainstream cultures in hip hop. All the same, his name is also said to be an homage to his early hip hop partner, the Jaz, remembered in hip hop circles for the song “Hawaiian Sophie,” a comical yet somewhat typical braggadocio song about a man in Hawaii who fights off his woman’s ex-boyfriend and wins her. If one watches the video closely, a young Jay-Z made his first media appearance. Carter was not only in some of the Jaz’s early videos but recorded verses on some of his records. Such early performances, and some well-chosen underground battles, helped get his name to the right music labels, officially launching his career.

Although his work with the Jaz and another group, Original Flavor, seemed preliminary to the recording career of Jay-Z, it may have proven to be quite instructive. It could be argued that these early commercial failures taught Carter more about the music business than one might presume. If nothing else, to a young MC starting out in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the entertainment industry could be quite heartless. Unlike today’s record industry, record labels in the past were unsure about hip hop’s potential to make money. Although there were a number of successful bids by breakout groups like Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys, this period was a vicious time for rappers, DJs, and producers alike. Several groups experienced problems with record labels. The Cold Crush Brothers had disputes over distribution with Tuff City and Profile Records. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five disputed royalties with Sugar Hill Records. Even in the early 1990s, the GZA, who would go on to form Wu-Tang Clan, felt that Cold Chillin’ Records could not envision how to market his 1991 solo release *Words from the Genius*. These problems reflect the constant struggle artists had with labels about how hip hop should look and sound.

Record labels were unsure what to do with hip hop and had some difficulty trying to market it. For the most part, their early ambivalence toward hip hop existed partly because many MCs were not formally trained in recognized
musical traditions. Often they only came with a pad of paper, a pencil, and countless hours of experience rhyming in back rooms and on the streets with friends and rivals. So although hip hop offered opportunities for poor, uneducated youth with a talent for wordplay and onstage charisma, record labels left many of them destitute. Yet by the late 1980s, record companies had long figured out that it was more lucrative, easier to sell to specific audiences, and cheaper for them to find individual MCs rather than DJs to headline shows and appear on album covers. Thus, ironically, corporate media moguls influenced this underground culture more than many would anticipate by helping to replace DJs with MCs (who, in the past, were only onstage to help hype up the crowds and draw attention to the DJ by translating for the crowd what the DJ was doing, how difficult it was, and when they should applaud).

Carter witnessed these trends early on and managed to avoid many of the dangers of the entertainment business. In fact, in his song “Izzo (H.O.V.A.),” Jay-Z talks about how he planned to exploit the very industry that exploited his early hip hop predecessors. In the example he gives in “Izzo,” he describes how record labels Tuff City Records and Profile Records underpaid the Cold Crush Brothers, and suggests that current rappers will rectify the exploitation of past artists and stabilize the entertainment business for future recording artists. Jay-Z never identified, however, what today’s artists would do to put money into the pockets of their predecessors.

No doubt, some of hip hop’s greatest rhyme pioneers influenced Jay-Z’s appreciation for lyricism. Artists like Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow, Melle Mel, and LL Cool J showed that hip hop was marketable. These people were some of the first to make money and sustain careers as hip hop artists. For young people growing up in the projects of Brooklyn, such lifestyles were attractive, but more important, far less dangerous than the some of the illegal alternatives. Rappers like Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers, Kool Moe Dee of the Treacherous Three, Rakim of Eric B. & Rakim, and Run-DMC helped develop Jay-Z’s understanding of what one could do in hip hop. Caz and Kool Moe Dee helped introduce more complicated lyrical flows in the early 1980s, and these flows were later enhanced by the likes of Big Daddy Kane, Kool G Rap, and Rakim. Known for lyrical flows that seemed reminiscent of jazz riffs, Rakim alone would develop a reputation for innovating how rappers conceptualized the notion of the verse, what could be done with it, and how much information and content one could convey while manipulating the tempo and measure of a beat. In fact, he helped redefine what it meant to rap by rhyming at a syncopated pace unheard of before. Without question, Jay-Z’s comfort with such lyrical complexity owes its origin to these predecessors.

The name Signified on the wealthy New York–based Rockefeller family. Like the rags-to-riches stories of some notable hip hop figures like Too $hort, Master P, the Wu-Tang Clan, and even MC Hammer, Carter sold albums out of the trunk of his car. He shopped his own albums and hustled interviews wherever he could. The advantage for Carter was that he had a marketable product, unlike many others trying to get their careers going (many artists had demos with underground credibility, but Carter’s had well-known producers, subject matter that was accessible to new audiences, and dance-friendly beats and samples). Tracks on his 1996 debut album, *Reasonable Doubt*, were produced by the likes of DJ Clark Kent, Irv Gotti, and arguably one of the most credible and talented hip hop producers of all time, DJ Premier. It is said that this entrepreneurial drive impressed Priority Records; albeit far more likely they saw something that could actually sell (since hip hop’s entrepreneurial drive was already abundant in New York, especially in the mid-1990s). Nevertheless, Priority Records opted to go in on the album and help release it in a joint arrangement with the newly devised Roc-A-Fella Records.

The album did well, reaching number twenty-three on the Billboard album chart. Tracks like “Dead Presidents” and “Can I Live” helped sketch out a

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**Roc-A-Fella Records**

*T. Hasan Johnson*

Roc-A-Fella Records was started in 1995 because Jay-Z could not find a suitable record deal. In 1994 he, Damion “Dame” Dash, and Kareem “Biggs” Burke formed Roc-A-Fella Records. They pressed their own albums and sold them locally, without a major distributor. Eventually, Priority Records noticed them and signed them to release Jay-Z’s first album, *Reasonable Doubt*, as a joint-release venture. Later, Roc-A-Fella became a limited liability company that shared its assets, especially sales, with its parent company Def Jam, which proved to be a lucrative venture for all parties involved. After the first major hit from *Reasonable Doubt*, “Ain’t No Nigga” with Def Jam’s then-unknown Foxy Brown, Jay-Z introduced Roc-A-Fella to the world.

Roc-A-Fella is part of the Island Def Jam Music Group, a record label produced by Universal Music Group when it merged its two subsidiary companies, Island Records and Def Jam Records. They have an impressive list of artists, including Beanie Sigel, Kanye West, Cam’Ron, and the late Ol’ Dirty Bastard. They have recently ventured into filmmaking, apparel, and liquor. However, in January 2005, Island Def Jam announced that it purchased Roc-A-Fella and that Jay-Z would preside over Def Jam, but Dash and Burke were released as cofounders. This motivated them to start Damon Dash Music Group and split artists between Dash and Jay-Z. During Roc-A-Fella’s award-winning ten-year run, they launched a sizeable number of careers and would eventually make history by being the vehicle for Jay-Z’s rise to the top.

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The album did well, reaching number twenty-three on the Billboard album chart. Tracks like “Dead Presidents” and “Can I Live” helped sketch out a
new era in the gangsta rap subgenre of hip hop—the advent of what I call the reflective thug. Although technically this trend could be traced to artists like Afrika “Bam” Bambaataa, Rakim, or Ice-T, the new era of Jay-Z, Biggie Smalls, and Tupac had its own distinct approach. Despite what critics argued, these artists did not solely glamorize violence; they often questioned violence, or rather they helped create a language that framed violence in alignment with consequences (an approach that was more common in early gangsta rap than some critics acknowledged). At the same time, Jay-Z did not seek to repeat the preachy, high-browed approach of conscious hip hop artists in the late 1980s (see sidebar: Conscious Hip Hop). Instead, Jay and his contemporaries

Conscious Hip Hop
T. Hasan Johnson

The conscious hip hop movement began with Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force. Although such statements are subjective, there is one clear division between these groups and others—subject matter. Mostly, conscious artists address issues like spiritual uplift (instead of materialism), community (instead of individualism), mobilization (instead of apathy), universal familyhood (instead of racial divisiveness), and at times, the use of a party as a momentary release rather than the primary goal of musical production. Considering when hip hop emerged, it is not surprising that the Reagan era inspired conscious artists to respond to the destitute conditions of urban America. Government-imposed poverty, the CIA-embedded crack cocaine epidemic, and wealth-for-the-wealthy government policies helped ensure that poor people of color found few avenues for economic uplift.

Hip hop helped frame a national and international critique of societal inequities. These artists, pulling from the remains of disco and R&B to craft their new sound, found new ways to articulate the nature of post–civil rights, post–Black Power oppression. This was most clearly articulated in Melle Mel’s song “The Message” (1982), which defined the potential of a rap record. Yet before this, there were many artists that contributed to the foundation of conscious hip hop.

For the sake of clarity, one could argue that there have been at least four generations of conscious rappers. Although this list is not exhaustive, it does outline the range of artists that frame conscious hip hop’s development over time. The first generation, roughly traced from 1975 to 1983, consisted of artists like Kool Herc, Africa Bambaataa, Melle Mel, the Cold Crush Brothers, Kurtis Blow, Treacherous Three, Run-DMC, the Beastie Boys, and Ice-T. The second generation, from 1983 to 1989, consisted of KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions, Eric B. & Rakim, MC Lyte, Public Enemy, Gang Starr, Queen Latifah and the Flavor Unit, Naughty by Nature, Monie Love, Salt-N-Pepa, the Native Tongues (De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and the Jungle
Brothers), and Stetsasonic. The third generation, 1989 to 1996, consisted of N.W.A., X-Clan, Paris, Leaders of the New School, Tupac, Nas, Brand Nubian, Jeru the Damaja, Outkast, Scarface, the Roots, the Fugees, and Goodie Mob. The current generation dates from approximately 1997 to the present, including artists like Lauryn Hill, Common, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, dead prez, Immortal Technique, Kanye West, Asheru, and J-Live.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the U.S. war with Iraq, and Hurricane Katrina, MCs that were not normally considered conscious have started to bemoan the state of things, radically breaking with audience expectations. Hence, a number of artists like MF DOOM, Trick Daddy, David Banner, Jay-Z, and, most legendarily, Tupac Shakur have been notorious for complicating these supposed boundaries. Each of these, and numerous others, have developed reputations for their musical content but have also made some very soul-stirring, deeply emotive records that warrant a close examination of the categories and standards of conscious hip hop, and, more important, who gets to determine how it is defined.

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In 1997, Jay-Z released *In My Lifetime, Volume 1*, with Bad Boy Entertainment’s Sean Combs at the production helm. Although he sold more albums than before because of his appeal to pop audiences, and garnered far more radio play than his previous effort due to less violent songs (the album
went platinum and reached number three on the Billboard charts), Jay-Z simultaneously received critical praise and underground criticism. Almost as if it were scripted, it seemed the more praise he received from mainstream sources, the more criticism he received from the underground (although the lines between both were as nebulous as ever). Jay-Z responded by releasing an onslaught of creative productions. In 1998 he released *Volume 2: Hard Knock Life*, his highest selling album to date, going platinum five times over. *Volume 3: Life and Times of S. Carter* followed in 1999 (marking his most widespread collaboration with other artists yet), preceding 2000’s *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* (three times platinum), and 2001’s *The Blueprint* (including the reissued 2002 *The Blueprint 2: The Gift and the Curse*).

However, his most noteworthy album may have been his 2003 retirement album, *The Black Album*. Coupled with his film, *Fade to Black* (a documentary and large-scale concert at Madison Square Garden in New York that featured Jay-Z, Ghostface Killah, Foxy Brown, Mary J. Blige, and R. Kelly, among others), Carter’s *Black Album* spawned an underground renaissance of epic proportions—the producer’s remix. After the release of various unauthorized remixes, Jay-Z released an a capella version of the album for both established and up-and-coming artists to experiment with. This helped create over 100 remixes of Jay-Z’s final album, advertising Jay-Z on an unprecedented level (see sidebar: The *Black Album* Remix Phenomenon). Although

**The *Black Album* Remix Phenomenon**
*T. Hasan Johnson*

Jay-Z released *The Black Album* in 2003, and later released an a cappella version specifically for DJs and producers. Although a definitive number is still in question, there are over a hundred remixes, with the top albums being *The Brown Album* (by Kev Brown, former A Touch of Jazz producer), *The White Album* (from Kno of the Atlanta-based group Cunninlynguists), DJ Cheap Cologne’s *The Double Black Album*, and Danger Mouse’s *The Grey Album*.

Kev Brown was the first to do a remix; his rendition offers a laid-back, jazzy interpretation. However, before he could claim credit, he was soon overshadowed by DJ Danger Mouse. Mouse received attention because of his use of samples from the classic *White Album* by the Beatles. After releasing 3,000 promotional copies, he was served with a cease-and-desist order from EMI, who owns the rights to *The White Album* master. After threatening others who tried to release the album, the company finally backed down and the album can still be found online.

What is most significant about DJ Danger Mouse was the Grey Tuesday protest. Despite cease-and-desist orders from EMI, over 170 Web sites posted his album, in its entirety, for free download. On February 24, 2004, over 1 million computer users downloaded the album. This protest argued that such
creations, and the Internet itself, should remain a free zone for artists and fans to enjoy and exchange artistic productions. This propelled Mouse’s popularity to an unparalleled degree for several reasons; aside from the obvious gesture by fans to support free music and their desire to support creative license, they were also launching a preemptive strike against what many perceived as a looming threat to such creative exchange—corporate and government regulation of Internet practices. In other words, since corporate crackdowns on Napster (and the rise of P2P file-sharing communities like BitTorrents, FastTrack, Gnutella, KaZaA, Limewire, Morpheus, OpenNap, and WinMX), corporations and the politicians they are rumored to be funding have been trying to find new ways to inhibit how people use the Internet. In light of this, online activists wanted to make a statement about creative freedom and overarching corporate control. Nevertheless, such protests prompted the remix phenomenon to even greater levels.

Kno of the group Cunninlynguists released Kno vs. Hov: The White Albulum, a well-produced challenge to the original, from the track order to the overall feel of the album. Cheap Cologne gained attention because he opened the door to rock listeners by sampling from Metallica’s The Black Album (hence the Double Black in the title). He later received a cease-and-desist order from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), a group that represents the five major record labels. The letter threatened jail time and a $250,000 fine if he didn’t stop distribution of the album. Nevertheless, although these remixes are mostly made for fun rather than money, they illustrate the recording industry’s need to develop new ways to keep up with consumers’ interests, especially when consumers start creatively remixing their favorite artist’s albums themselves.

Works Cited


Jay-Z was hardly the first hip hop artist to promote remixes, he did capitalize on it in a whole new way.

In 2005, Jay-Z became the president and CEO of Def Jam Recordings. This followed a widely publicized split with Damon Dash and Kareem “Biggs” Burke, who, after the falling-out, started a new company, Damon Dash Music Group. Jay-Z went on to redevelop Def Jam’s image, and in 2005, at a New York radio station’s (Power 105.1) annual concert, showed up onstage with Nas, ending the much-publicized feud between the two (see Nas essay). He has also made plans to firmly legitimate his relationship with the West Coast by starting Roc-A-Fella West and signing a Bay Area artist named Immense. However, despite his success and his supposed retirement (which many consider as unrealistic as the retirement of Too $hort, who released several works
after he announced he was calling it quits), Jay-Z managed to escape his most dogged followers—his critics. But what do critics see in Jay-Z? What bothers them? What scares them? What makes some of them love him, and most important, what does Jay-Z’s success say about what he means to people?

DEFINING THE FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

Jay-Z has complained about having to dumb down his lyrics for mainstream consumption (in The Black Album’s “Moment of Clarity”), pointing out that it’s only when he does such things that he goes triple or quintuple platinum. However, several factors contribute to Jay’s success and simultaneously reflect the state of hip hop. Jay-Z’s flow has developed and changed over the years. Early on, he was known for his fast-paced flow and dizzying lyrical performances. This and the fact that he performed these songs live in concert made him a well-respected figure in underground circles. He could rhyme the material performed in the studio onstage without losing a beat. Also, he is rumored to have never written a song down; he claims to have memorized his lyrics from freestyle performances in the studio. It is said that Jay-Z could go to a studio, listen to the track, and then drive around in his car for a while until he had freestyled a new hit. This way, his topics and materials could stem from whatever was on his mind at the time he got to the studio. Ironically, this would prove difficult for some of his producers (namely Kanye West who, on his 2004 debut album The College Dropout, on the song “Last Call,” mentioned how he made a beat for Jay-Z and hoped he would not get the “introspective, meditative” Jay-Z, but instead the “light-hearted” Jay-Z). Nevertheless, which Jay-Z a producer might get was hard to anticipate as he would not write anything until he meditated on a beat). Unfortunately, by the mid-1990s, such talent was becoming more and more infrequent. Few artists mastered the balance between lyrical complexity, metaphorical delivery, and storytelling, as many could only do one (or maybe two) at one time. For Jay-Z, although his earlier work emphasized fast wordplays, he developed a solid reputation for achieving this balance. After Reasonable Doubt, most notably on tracks like “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” and “Hard Knock Life,” Jay-Z illustrated his ability to use metaphor (and tell stories) as opposed to just quick flows. More important, Jay-Z learned to package his gritty life story into a narrative that made him a bootstrap success story. In other words, he learned that creating a rise-from-the-ghetto narrative made him more palatable to mainstream audiences (most were used to hard-luck stories in hip hop, but were new to MCs that could create a persona they could not only understand, but one they could identify with even if they did not regularly listen to hip hop). Essentially, he learned a hidden golden rule in entertainment: Make it as easy as possible for your audience to remember you.
Along with creating a persona in the entertainment industry, the use of a marketable narrative can help with album sales. As KRS-One said on his 1995 self-titled album in the song “Health, Wealth, Self,” “Sell your image, never sell a record.” Understanding this principle helped Jay-Z achieve another goal—increased marketability. Jay-Z now sold albums, represented himself on the radio, and marketed himself more easily because people outside of New York, the underground scene, and most notably, outside of hip hop could relate to what he was saying. This meant that suburbanites, rock listeners, and alternative music fans alike could not only understand Jay-Z but could understand how to understand him. Additionally, at this point, they could also become more acclimated to hip hop music in general—especially artists affiliated with Jay-Z’s Roc-A-Fella label. Clearly, production played a strong role in his marketability, and Jay-Z had a reputation for working with the likes of DJ Premier, Puff Daddy, the Neptunes (Pharell in particular), Timbaland, Just Blaze, and most notably, the up-and-coming Kanye West.

More important than production, though, are Jay-Z’s lyrics. For the most part, Jay-Z’s choice of subject matter is more easily accessible to those as yet uninitiated into the hip hop aesthetic. This may have been part of what he complained about regarding “dumb[ing] down” his lyrics on “Moment of Clarity,” but it nonetheless helped make his music more popular on MTV and other more mainstream media outlets. Possibly due to his rhyme writing style, Jay-Z was criticized for years for not addressing more complicated subjects, engaging political issues, or explicating how MCs could be more responsible for the impact of their work on the youth community. Seldom acknowledging these critiques openly, he eventually argued that the fact that he spoke out about the ghetto was a form of political activism in itself. Albeit a clichéd remark by MCs by the mid-1990s, Jay-Z seemed adamant about his stance and argued that as long as he rhymed about such things, he was helping to address social ills by bringing the harsh conditions of the ghetto to national and international scrutiny.

Despite the desire to speak out on social issues, Jay-Z understood the difficulty that came with being a social critic in hip hop. As a student of the history of hip hop, Jay-Z was quite familiar with the dangers of being pigeonholed by his audience, a record label, or any other institution invested in his album sales. Artists like Public Enemy, X-Clan, and Paris demonstrated how restrictive both the record industry and audiences could be toward what artists may want to produce, and what record executives and fans want to hear. Alternatively, rappers who were labeled as gangstas or criminals had difficulty making any other kind of music than what people expected from them. Whether it is due to intelligence, creativity, or just luck, Jay-Z managed to somewhat avoid inhibiting categories (at least compared to other artists), despite his complaints about the limitations in subject matter available to him.

Tangentially, Jay-Z’s approach to spirituality also caught a lot of people’s attention. He is abstract, vague, and yet inspiring for many hip hoppers.
navigating the difficult spaces of nondenominational forms of spiritual inquiry. Jay speaks with the boldness of a member of the Nation of Gods and Earths, the casual practicality of a Sunni Muslim (almost lackadaisically so), and the popular appeal of a Catholic pope. His spiritual message, albeit unclear, has used short statements and occasional references to provide his listeners with a nontraditional approach to spirituality that may be more reflective of today’s postreligiosity than anything else. While it is nonreligious, nondenominational, and yet open to the possibility of a spiritual force in the universe, many of Jay-Z’s fans identify with his approach to spirituality (often articulated through hard and gritty stories about life, death, violence, and survival). Speaking as a sympathetic (and almost apologetic) ex-drug dealer and criminal, Jay has acknowledged the difficulties of following a spiritual path while addressing the practicality of making a daily living. In many ways, this approach resonated with many of his fans, and quite possibly, it may have also taught some of them about why they should be remorseful about what they do.

Another reason for Jay-Z’s success was that he understood the notion of symbolic representation. In essence, he knew that to represent himself as the preeminent rags-to-riches paragon, he could attract those that were living in the same conditions he grew up in, while supplying them with the hope that they could also get out of a life of poverty, criminality, and violence. He also understood that he could attract youth from black, white, Latino, and Asian middle-class (and suburban) communities through his descriptive lyrics on style, taste, and material acquisition. Although some of them may not be able to identify with his hard-knock origins, they could identify with the desire to be able to purchase nice clothes, buy expensive cars, and drink trendy alcoholic beverages (most preferably with your name endorsed on the bottle). In other words, they could identify with the relationship between possessing the means for increasing their material ownership and the idea that material items are signifiers for status in American society. This phenomenon should be understood as more complex and challenging than it may appear. For the generation of youth born after the 1970s, the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and COINTELPRO’s war against the black activist community, the turbulent 1960s do not generally resonate as real. Instead, much of the legacy of these historical movements are somewhat amalgamated, assumed to be part of the milieu of daily reality for today’s youth. Hence, class can be constructed and understood in slightly different ways by today’s youth, who are hopelessly mixed and blended (racially, politically, and socioeconomically) in ways almost unheard-of forty years ago. Therefore for Jay-Z’s audience, instead of what job, academic degree, or type of house they owned, questions of class and status could be attributed to more fluid approaches to material wealth, like how much money they have access to (not how they got it), how well they could acquire wealth without working a conventional job, and how well they could find new ways to bring the street
experience to the boardroom. Although to some these divisions may not be any better than the last set of standards for class stratification, they do allow for larger groups of younger people to participate in society on their own terms.

The fourth reason for Jay-Z’s success is his approach to black masculinity. Although not entirely original, his casual approach to pimpin’, money making, style, material wealth, and business acumen made him a new type of hip hop icon, a sort of laid-back pimp in control. Arguably taking the New York MC crown in the wake of Biggie Smalls’s death, Jay-Z claimed (repeatedly) to be the “best rapper alive” (e.g., “Dirt Off Your Shoulder,” The Black Album). He also articulated his disapproval of his rivals (Nas, Prodigy of Mobb Deep, Tupac, etc.) by retaliating against them in his music, suggesting that he would attack anyone who challenged him, and more important, be more masculine than them. This resonated with many of his fans, mainly young men who want to identify with Jay-Z’s pimp-in-control image. Also, his approach to women, mainly framed as a player who controls and manipulates them, suggests a form of masculinity that may complicate black male-female relationships. In the song “Girls, Girls, Girls” on his 2001 Blueprint album, he describes how many girls he has and how well he controls each of them, despite that he portrays most of them as characteristically flawed.

On the surface, the problem is that the type of masculinity Jay-Z exemplifies is often destructive, clichéd, and confrontational. Although this has become the norm for many rappers in hip hop, such behavior still raises questions about whether or not there can be a new, more productive form of masculinity that artists could espouse other than stereotypical pimps and gangsters. For example, in the song “Friend or Foe ’98” on In My Lifetime, Volume 1 (1997), he tells a story about surprising an assassin who has been planning to kill him. He then proceeds to kill the assassin, but only after taking the time to explain to him how much more of a man he is—suggesting that whoever gets to kill first is more the man. Despite such lyrics, more recently, Jay-Z has redefined his machismo persona. In a feud with Nas, both artists demonstrated the capacity for maturity in hip hop by publicly reconciling (discussed later). Nevertheless, Jay-Z’s popularity is closely related to his approach to black male masculinity, and after the deaths of his predecessors Biggie and Tupac, he had to reevaluate the value of the macho approach to manhood.

A fifth reason for Jay-Z’s success is how his music lends itself to “virtual blackness.” Virtual blackness refers to the idea that the socially constructed notion of blackness, rooted in a history of racism, negativity, and depravity, can be experienced vicariously through a medium that separates the listener from the experience, leaving them free to experience stereotypical forms of blackness without the societal repercussions that come with criminal behavior (e.g., jail, violent retaliation, death, etc.). In the past, black entertainers and athletes were often used by white (and other) elite audiences in this manner.
However, intrinsic to the rise of entertainment-based technology, people of all class stations, races, colors, genders, and sexual orientations can experience virtual blackness. This might just be partially what draws mainstream audiences to rap music—the desire to experience blackness. Such blackness, usually perceived as a form of otherness, is also projected on nonblack MCs who participate in hip hop culture. Yet it is not surprising that the types of blackness mainstream audiences are exposed to in hip hop are limited, or as bell hooks said in her 1992 book *Black Looks*, “we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy, [not challenge it].”

In Jay-Z’s case, virtual blackness relates to the popular idea that the violence in black ghettos across America is highly adventurous and entertaining. Because Jay-Z’s music has always been associated with such violence, and his lyrics are often quite explicit and detailed, people of all backgrounds and orientations can safely experience blackness, violence, and ghetto life without enduring the repercussions that come with it. However, in a positive sense, people can also imagine what it may be like to be a black multimillionaire who drives a Bentley, scoffs at the police, dates Beyoncé Knowles, and can command a stadium full of people when performing. Essentially, blackness can now be associated with wealth and success as well as violence and chaos. Yet the overly indulgent imaginings of black success can also be perceived in unrealistic ways, often to belie the harsh economic conditions that many African Americans experience daily. This, in turn, can create problematic ideas about how black people expend wealth. Thus, if one learns about wealth through hip hop, and by extension Jay-Z, one only learns about the most superficial and materialistic aspects of it, not its less obvious components (investing, real estate acquisition, and saving for life after retirement).

But what is the definition of success? For Jay-Z, the question has already been answered—wealth and fame. However, even he has admitted that if he had his way, he would like to create music more like those that don’t sell half of what he does. MCs like Common, Mos Def, and Talib Kweli represent the next phase of an underground segment of hip hop usually referred to as conscious. Although they have made great strides to distance themselves from this term (arguing that it has limited the types of audiences they can attract, the wealth they can accumulate, and the types of music they can make), they are still able to make music that reaches people and addresses a wider range of issues and topics than other hip hop artists, even issues of spirituality. Jay-Z criticized Common on *The Black Album* by pointing out how many albums he’s sold in comparison, but the line seemed to express a degree of sincerity in his wish to create music not limited to materialism and gangsta bravado. On another track, Jay bemoans having to dumb down his lyrics, but then quickly states that when he does he sells more albums, sort of admonishing his audience for forcing him into his musical style. Nevertheless, this conflicted and complicated assessment of his self-styled persona begs the question, what is success? True, to be worth $320 million is clearly a success for most people,
but how successful is it when you cannot make the kind of music you want to for fear of losing your audience? Jay-Z himself followed this line of questioning in his film *Fade to Black* (2004) when, in conversation with another MC in a studio, they discussed how rappers have to make music that stays within a static, formulaic framework of violence and misogyny. Although using another artist to make his point, one might easily assume that he was also talking about himself.

It would seem, nonetheless, that Jay-Z did finally answer the riddle of how to be yourself in the entertainment industry: do it behind the scenes, not onstage. Do it by bringing the street hustle to the corporate boardroom. Jay-Z’s decision to preside over Def Jam in 2005 might be the opportunity for him to create his brand of music, albeit more indirectly than he might wish. Jay-Z has helped spawn the careers of a number of artists like Memphis Bleek, Beanie Sigel, Amil, Kanye West, Freeway, Cam’Ron, Young Gunz, Immense, and Samantha Ronson. However, as CEO of Def Jam, he might be able to write policy that determines funding and supports the development of new artists with vastly different styles and skills than his own.

**UNDERGROUND VERSUS MAINSTREAM: MANUFACTURING MARKET APPEAL**

When analyzing Jay-Z’s success, one factor that consistently comes up is the question of mainstream market interest versus underground hip hop aesthetic. In many ways, Jay-Z is the perfect figure to examine this dynamic, as he was perceived as an underground MC (like many other artists) early in his career. In fact, even Nas was amazed at the degree of underground respect Jay-Z achieved back in 1992. Prior to the release of his first album, Jay-Z had achieved a degree of notoriety that other, more experienced MCs could not match for a good period of time. However, by the time his 1997 album *In My Lifetime, Volume 1* was released, Jay-Z was a superstar whose fans complained that he was pandering to mainstream audiences too much. Although Jay-Z did not see the problem with collaborations with producers like Puff Daddy and Rick Rubin, his reputation for maintaining his underground grit began to suffer. In response, Jay-Z released the straight-to-video film *The Streets Is Watching* in 1997. His goal was to remind his underground fans that he was still an artist to be reckoned with, and he was still as hard as ever.

Nevertheless, the quest for a wide-ranging audience has its costs, and after the release of his 1998 album, *Volume 2: Hard Knock Life*, Jay-Z seemed solidified in his position as a commercial artist. He has managed to maintain his core audience in the long run, which is a difficult feat not easily accomplished once accusations of selling out set in. But Jay-Z walked the line between both for a long time. Eventually, his fans overlooked his overproduced, uber-mixed sound. Albums like *Volume 3: Life and Times of S. Carter*
(1999) and *The Blueprint* (2001), considered in many circles to be classics (most notably the latter), seemed to acclimate Jay-Z’s audience to albums that were a hodgepodge of mainstream and underground tracks alike. This worked to Jay-Z’s advantage as a means of making music that maintained his street credentials and appealed to his expanding fan base (mostly due to MTV and BET’s all-day video format).

Although mainstream appeal is not an issue that started with Jay-Z, it has plagued hip hop artists since its inception. Whether talking about the Sugarhill Gang, Will Smith, MC Hammer, Vanilla Ice, or Eminem, questions of mainstream appeal have been a long-standing point of contention in the hip hop community. Many artists argued that they were merely trying to help hip hop by expanding its audience base, raising the issue about the degree to which hip hop might find itself oversaturated with fans who do not appreciate its history, even posing a threat to the culture.

Currently, the difficulty is that hip hop has become a global phenomenon. Five-year-old kids in Ghana, England, South Africa, Japan, Jamaica, India, and Brazil can quote Jay-Z’s lyrics as well as he, and more to the point, have crafted their own forms of hip hop. It has reached across the world from the streets of Brooklyn and the Bronx and has sparked a worldwide response. However, to the extent that it has reached the world, the recording industry and corporate media institutions have also grown due to the marketing of hip hop culture. If anything, hiphop has become synonymous with youth culture, and for many youth it has become a necessary part of their self-identity. Jay-Z, Nas, Biggie Smalls, Tupac, Ice Cube, and many more have become part of the lexicon of hip hop lingo and comprise a hip hop pantheon of sorts. Although their representations have become synonymous with hip hop, and by extension American hip hop culture, they have also become symbolic of something else—or rather a series of other issues. Corporate media (via television, radio, and Internet), corporate production, the marketing of consumer commodities, and the culture of Western consumerism have used MCs as vehicles for the sale of their products. Therefore, CDs and music videos pave the way for the production and sale of sneakers, liquor, cars, clothes, jewelry, and other consumer items, but more important, they become the vehicle for the unilateral and unidirectional imposition of Western cultural values on non-Western people. Since the United States primarily establishes trade from its borders to other borders unilaterally (especially with third world countries), ideas about gender, color, class, and sexuality have all become standards for “civilized” behavior. Moreover, attitudes about violence, rape, and aggression—and their ties to black masculinity—have become part of the social memory of “American-ness,” “hip hop-ness,” and “blackness” around the world. Although this is not accepted without challenge from global consumers, it is nonetheless part of what they must contend with once received. Therefore, consumers who support underground hip hop often understand that their local culture is intricately tied to the global experience, and
contradict corporate attempts to use hip hop culture as a marketing vehicle by advocating a global culture of nonmaterialism and artistic proficiency.

It is from this vantage point that questions about Jay-Z’s marketability, crossover appeal, and mainstream success become more poignant. What does his success, and those who strive to duplicate it, mean in the larger view? Jay remarked on the song “Moment of Clarity” (*The Black Album*) that he decided that the only way he could help the poor was to become rich and give back, but having spent so much of his time describing his material wealth—or at least his aspirations for acquiring more of it—can a promaterialist hip hop aesthetic be used to help people less fortunate? Although it may be difficult to measure, some hip hop artists have attempted to developed philanthropic practices. In 2002 Jay-Z and his mother founded the S. Carter Scholarship Fund, a nonprofit organization that provides financial assistance to those interested in furthering their education. Other artists have developed philanthropic practices as well, as the Game and Chingy were said to have given funds for victims of the 2004 Asian tsunami and Sri Lanka earthquake. 50 Cent and the Game, as a symbolic gesture of peace to end their feud, decided (at the behest of Russell Simmons) to each give donations to the Boys Choir of Harlem. Such acts may seem sparse and underwhelming when compared to the kinds of riches these artists flaunt in their music and in videos (and it is difficult to determine how much these artists actually do give back to the communities they hail from), but it is still worth mention. However, whether or not these artists understand the connection between their on-wax materialism and the impact it may have on young listeners has yet to be determined.

For Jay-Z, his music communicates a series of values and ideas that he himself may only be partly aware of. Jay-Z sees his wealth as a testament to his hard work, effort, and talent, and, to be sure, this is true. But his wealth is only possible because of the sacrifices of the economically impoverished communities that helped mold his cultural aesthetic. It is hoped that hip hop artists like Jay-Z have reflected on the weight of their cultural influence on society, as the poor communities that manufacture consumer items sold by rappers (communities whose members often strive to own these consumer items themselves) have internalized the values espoused in these albums. It is this level of responsibility and analysis that many of Jay-Z’s critics and fans would like to see him address. How does an MC from humble beginnings reach the pinnacle of stardom and wealth, albeit on the backs of other poor people, and not come to grips with this intrinsic irony? What does an MC who realizes this do? Moreover, how much can any one artist be expected to do about it?

THE ROLE OF BEEF IN JAY-Z’S FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

One of the staples of hip hop culture has been the battle, and Jay-Z is no stranger to it. Having had issues with Tupac, Mobb Deep, the Terror Squad,
Cam’Ron, R. Kelly, and Nas in particular, Jay-Z has helped reinsert the significance of the battle in hip hop after the deaths of the Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac.

For the most part, the battle in hip hop has always been about competition and proving one’s lyrical skills to be superior to another’s. Hip hop has helped refine the art of the battle to encapsulate the concerns, issues, attitudes, and perspectives of fans, thus making many battles iconic in the memories of hip hop fans. Also, battling has helped frame the development and trajectory of hip hop’s aesthetic. Battles between Busy Bee and Kool Moe Dee, Big Daddy Kane and Kool G Rap, Kool Moe Dee and LL Cool J, X-Clan and KRS-One, Tupac and Biggie, LL Cool J and Canibus, Eminem and Benzino, and Jay-Z and Nas each represent turning points in hip hop culture. Busy Bee and Kool Moe Dee almost single-handedly shifted the aesthetic value of battle rapping above party pleasing, with Bee representing the old tradition of sparking the party, and Dee representing the newer tradition of battling and demonstrating one’s superior skill. Big Daddy Kane and Kool G Rap redefined the craft of lyrical precision and complicated syncopation, much like Rakim, but in adversarial conversation with one another. Kool Moe Dee and LL Cool J battled on wax, extending their feud for years by trading song for song on sequential albums. X-Clan and KRS-One set a standard for the first significant battle in hip hop over Pan-African/Black Power ideology, while Eminem and Benzino raised issues of race, whiteness, and privilege in hip hop culture (and among hip hop consumers). However, the battle between Tupac and Biggie might be the most widely known. Theirs may represent the first public battle in hip hop to not only end in bloodshed, but with each of their eventual deaths.

Tupac and Biggie’s battle terrified rappers from the East and West Coasts (with many refusing to go to the opposite’s coast, even when not affiliated with either Biggie or Tupac). After their deaths, people from within and outside of hip hop began to question the efficacy of the battle. Instead of criticizing the extent of that particular battle, they began to question the concept of the battle, suggesting that if it can go this far at this moment, what might happen in the future? However, battle rapping is unavoidable in hip hop, and according to Jay-Z, one needs an incredible ego just to handle the pressure that comes with being an MC. Inevitably, these mammoth-sized egos collide, and battles begin. Yet it seems that through such contention, hip hop culture flourishes, develops, and advances.

Jay-Z and Nas’s beef actually extended, somewhat, out of Biggie and Tupac’s. After Biggie’s death, questions about who would be the King of New York began to surface. For most, it did not take long before the fans’ gaze focused on Nas and Jay-Z. Jay-Z is actually rumored to have started the feud by dissing Nas at a concert. Nas responded, and between several radio freestyles, released songs, and recorded interviews, they split New York (and the hip hop world) in half. Many sided with Nas because they saw him as the more sincere MC, representing the tradition of hip hop, void of the excessive
pandering for mainstream appeal that many associate with Jay-Z. But Jay-Z’s undeniable appeal, tight production, and creative off-the-cuff style was, and always has been, more accessible to the casual listener than Nas’s. Although Nas could enjoy creating more esoteric lyrics and concepts, Jay-Z’s style seemed simple enough for anyone to grasp, and yet his metaphors, similes, and flow patterns captured people’s attention more readily than Nas’s. Nevertheless, people debate to this day as to who won the battle, which may be, quite possibly, the sign of success for both of them over the industry. The battle heightened both of their album sales and it would not take long before they both could do no wrong, creatively speaking. Surprisingly, the most significant part of their battle was how they chose to resolve it. Until then, hip hop could not claim to have had a great number of reconciliations (X-Clan/KRS-One and Common/Ice Cube aside), but Jay-Z and Nas had the most widely known hip hop battle to end in a resolution.

In a 2006 interview on an MTV show called *Beyond Beef*, Nas and Jay-Z discussed their battle, its reconciliation, and the potential for the future. Wisely, Jay-Z described how this monumental decision to end the beef may reverberate throughout hip hop, offering an alternative to Biggie and Tupac’s disastrous end. For some, it reminded artists that they are just that, artists, and not necessarily the figures they paint themselves to be (and even if they ever were, after that, many chose different ways to represent themselves). In the interview, Nas questioned some of the newer MCs that do not seem to have a connection to the history of hip hop and its culture, challenging them to take their craft more seriously; and more important, to use this reconciliation as an example of how not to allow violence to be the inevitable consequence of beef.

This represented a critical juncture for hip hop because it was the first such statement since the period of the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. The conscious hip hop movement, curtailed by the collusion of dwindling record sales and preachy lyrics, was more impactful than many gave it credit for. Aside from influencing hip hop artists directly, it also demonstrated the potential for hip hop to influence the social reality that many poor African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Chicano-Latinos, Asians, and others lived in. However, the industry was more concerned with less politically aware artists who were more marketable to mainstream audiences, staggering the growing consciousness movement in the early 1990s. Thus, it was primarily interested in mainstream record sales, and although positive hip hop albums sold well in predominantly black communities, they did not necessarily sell well in white communities. Simply put, positive albums about African American social uplift was not necessarily an unappealing concept for white (and other) communities, but it was not a particularly lucrative one. More important, it did not mesh with the dominant narratives about blackness that many were accustomed to. Despite portrayals of African Americans as upright, well-to-do citizens by such figures as Bill Cosby, most were more familiar with myths of black criminality,
depravity, and materialism. The legacy of postenlightenment Jim Crow ethnic caricature is so deeply embedded in Western culture that it is no accident that mainstream consumers would most strongly gravitate toward its most base impulses. This shift by the recording industry to redefine what types of artists should be touted as MCs for public consumption marked the decline of the conscious hip hop movement. Seemingly, Jay-Z represented the type of commercial MC the industry wanted—stylish, apolitical, trendy, and seemingly obsessed with material wealth. However, Jay-Z and Nas’s public acknowledgment of the correlation between hip hop and social awareness was important because it suggested that hip hop can still deal with more pressing social issues than materialism, especially at a time when America is more politically conservative than it has been in decades, and the ghetto may have more black men in prison than in the hood. But along with challenging materialism in hip hop, can artists with clout, like Jay-Z, challenge hip hop’s most dogged problem—sexism? Can they challenge the negative and oppressive representations of women in hip hop? And can such a challenge help address why consumers support the production of hyperexotic notions of femininity?

THE PROBLEM WITH “99 PROBLEMS”

For the most part, celebrity relationships have become a public institution. Much like other celebrity couples, Jay-Z and Beyoncé Knowles (of Destiny’s Child fame) have become the ideal hip hop couple. The two have become the topic of much conversation in the hip hop world. Mainly because hip hop has been known for its composition of young, adolescent males, the idea of Jay-Z with one of the most desirable women in the industry reaffirmed his persona to his fans. Although no one could say whether or not their relationship is genuine, its benefit as a marketing tool cannot be denied. However, such iconic status begs the question: Can hip hop overcome the difficulty it has always had with portraying women and overarching notions of domineering patriarchy? Can this new image of Jay-Z help mend fences with women who have argued for decades about misogyny in hip hop?

Despite the ways mainstream hip hop has portrayed women in music videos, songs, and other marketing paraphernalia, one of its most dangerous impacts has been the normalization of patriarchal attitudes. Accordingly, both men and women participate in the subjugation of womanhood and femininity. Jay-Z is hardly innocent. From the beginning of his career to his retirement album, he has seldom addressed women in a positive way. “99 Problems,” one of his more popular songs, represents the same kind of repetitive misogyny that has been a trademark in hip hop, even if the “bitch” in the song is not the primary topic of conversation.

One of Jay-Z’s landmark songs in relation to women was the duet with Foxy Brown, “Ain’t No Nigga.” In it, the hip hop world is introduced to
a new development—the mafiosa figure. The mafiosa, as played by Brown, is a materialistic woman crime boss who only answers to her previously incarcerated boyfriend (there is no information as to whether the two were ever married). She also exerts her power by pointing out that she is responsible for his financial success, style, and wealth because she has “cultivated” his talents and in her words, “made [him] a don.” She also does not care if he sees other women, as long as he treats her right by making sure that she continues to drive new cars and wear expensive furs. Brown’s caricature would make her famous in her own right (rivalled only by Lil’ Kim and Adina Howard); she soon embodied the female caricature articulated by Tupac in his song “Me and My Girlfriend” (1996). This song, about a man and his gun, is not a far stretch from Brown’s representation, as guns and women are still symbolic representations of objects owned by men. In fact, both guns and women are only useful when providing pleasure or exacting revenge for men. They are both, by nature (or so some MCs would have you believe), objects for men’s imagination. Love for both is solely contingent upon male fantasy, and neither has an independent voice. Interestingly enough, the character Brown portrays is as palpable as Jay-Z’s, as both are consistent with the stereotypes about black men and women: criminal, violent, sexually promiscuous, and manipulative. Both characters represent caricatures that seem quite consistent with stereotypical notions of blackness, at least in the mainstream imagination.

However, what Jay-Z may not do in his music to challenge stereotypes, he may accomplish in his private life. In one sense, Beyoncé is seen as the embodiment of postmillennium women’s pride, at least as far as pop music celebrities who address women’s issues are concerned. Songs like “Independent Woman Part I” (2001) and “Survivor” (2001) helped mold public perceptions of Beyoncé as one of the most exotically beautiful and outspoken R&B singers. For Jay-Z to perform with her in the song “Bonnie and Clyde” (2003) shows the continuation of the narrative that he, Tupac, and Biggie used before, albeit with a slight twist. Beyoncé, considered by some to be a more reputable feminist than Brown, offers a new type of mafiosa that appears far less materialistic and violent, but nonetheless supportive of her man. Beyoncé’s persona is confident and intelligent, with extensive experience with men who have tried to manipulate her. She outsmarts them and has sought to tell other women to do the same. In her music, acting career, and advertising roles, she has (to one degree or another) stayed true to this representation. Her relationship to Jay-Z, however, communicates a specific narrative in itself, considering that Jay-Z has always described himself as a pimp who manipulates women to suit his interests. In this regard, she has become an addition to his harem (a compliment to Jay-Z’s prowess), and rather than finding the type of man she has been looking for, she has instead found the type of man she has admonished others for falling for. No doubt, both public personas are pop culture fabrications that do not accurately reflect who they are as people, but such personas can be read in a narrative, textual fashion.
that communicates complex (and problematic) thematic codes on black male-female relationships.

Despite the apparent contradiction in the relationship between the public personas of both figures, the Jay-Z/Beyoncé union may offer a new idea about what type of woman, and by extension what type of masculinity, men in hip hop should consider valuable. As Beyoncé does not represent the typical woman articulated by male MCs, especially considering that she has a voice of her own (this refers to criticisms of Foxy Brown and Lil’ Kim as being mere “puppets” for male rappers Jay-Z and the Notorious B.I.G., respectively, who wrote their lyrics), she may provide a foil to many MCs’ perceptions of women. Even conscious MCs have trouble here, as artists like Jeru the Damaja on his *The Sun Rises in the East* (1994) and *Wrath of the Math* (1996) albums tried to delineate between “bitches” and “women,” arguing that the difference had to do with self-respect. Yet he was nonetheless criticized for making “bitches” the subject of the song, and not the respectable women he applauded. Where even conscious rappers have failed, Jay-Z may succeed and shift the standards for male-female relationships simply by publicly (and quite possibly strategically) associating with Beyoncé.

**JAY-Z, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE FUTURE OF THE NEW RECORDING INDUSTRY**

The record industry is undergoing a dramatic shift in both its infrastructure and its approach to musical production. Although this change is slow and plodding—brought on more by rogue artists and independent labels than its own decision to change—there is need for new blood (and new direction) at the decision-making level of many entertainment corporations, especially in regard to artistic production and management. There is a need for new parameters, new approaches, and a new overall scope of vision for the production of music in general. It is more plausible than people may think that Jay-Z could help spearhead, at least as far as public perception is concerned, this new infrastructural corporate movement. But what are some of the indicators of this need? Are the impending changes in the entertainment industry this deep and sweeping?

As far as the industry is concerned, downloading, or file sharing, in post-2000 cyberspace cost the recording industry millions. Record stores, labels, and artists themselves lost revenue because the industry could not determine how exactly to keep up with its clientele. Listeners no longer waited for industry-determined release dates for new albums. They could no longer be forced to purchase whole albums when they only wanted to buy their favorite songs (a phenomenon exacerbated by the recording industry’s decision not to sell singles in an effort to make more money from CD sales). In fact, even older albums that were difficult to find, or were unreleased, were now only a...
few clicks away from online consumers. However, not only did pirated copies of unreleased albums find their way into people’s computers, but people used file-sharing programs like Napster, Morpheus, and Limewire to share remixes and revisions that were as prevalent as the original albums. Hence, listeners were no longer satisfied with the gulf between artists and consumers. They also wanted to be artists but did not want to go through the initiatory process of paying for studio time, shopping demos, or finding a label to sign them. Instead, they downloaded needed sound-editing software to portable laptops, sampled and edited sound bites from the Internet, self-published albums, and marketed their creations globally over cheap (and easily made) Web sites. This new, more interactive approach to music production has made it difficult for the record industry to sustain itself comfortably and may still pose a serious threat to the security of the entertainment industry (as has also been the case with other forms of media, like film), unless they figure out a way to control the new and ever-expanding market. In alignment with this new mode of creation and distribution, artists like MF DOOM, Danger Mouse, Pharoah Monch, and Third Sight have also begun to create music that radically breaks from traditional norms and threatens to redefine hip hop’s aesthetic framework.

It should be stated here that this new framework also expands aesthetic standards beyond geographic and national boundaries. Such a process is usually confined to limited geographic areas (and heavily dependent on local radio stations, now locally franchised national corporations that control local and national news, music, trends, and styles), but as the Internet becomes more and more useful in the dissemination of music, new aesthetic standards are now starting to branch out and disturb conventional standards and traditional radio formats. What may be even more shocking to the industry is that some of these artists may make more money than the artists we see on MTV, despite the notably lower album sales and name recognition. Because they manage to keep a larger percentage of the profit from their album sales than the more widely known artists, they don’t need to sell as many albums to make a profit (especially if their albums were made on “indie” equipment—meaning far less money spent on production and sound editing—and especially if sold and distributed online, or rather, without major label involvement). This will be just one of the challenges Jay-Z will face in his position as CEO of Def Jam.

In order to address some of these concerns, Jay-Z has been quite ambitious about releasing new artists, groups, and record labels in order to both diversify Def Jam and keep up with the dizzying pace of consumer interest. Potentially, one of his most notable projects has been Def Jam Left, a subsidiary label under Def Jam designed with a specific purpose. Described by Jay-Z as a way for Def Jam to nurture new artists without pressuring them to produce an immediate gold record, Def Jam Left may prove to be more innovative than meets the eye. It coincides with the responses that many artists have begun to
voice toward the Iraq war, post-9/11 society, the Patriot Act, exploitive (international) globalization practices, pharmaceutical monopolies, police brutality, electoral cover-ups, and legislative fraud at the federal government level. Artists that would not have been concerned with these issues five years before, alongside artists considered politically active, are now becoming more and more outspoken about political issues, both local and far-ranging. Artists like Kanye West, Jadakiss, and Ludacris are now listed along with Common, Talib Kweli, Mos Def, and Black Thought from the Roots (who were, by the way, the first group signed to Jay-Z’s new Def Jam Left label) as being part of a new configuration of consciousness that did not exist before. Between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, hip hop was somewhat polarized as far as conscious (alternative) and mainstream music is concerned. There was little room for an artist that tried to do both, but now MCs are desperately trying to transcend such classifications, although many of them are still interested in speaking out when they deem it necessary. It seems that Jay-Z may have just given them the means to do so. In fact, he may have developed the means for hip hop to reevaluate its own standards for political activism, gender, masculinity, and class by creating the corporate vehicles best suited to support artists with new approaches. Also, he may have done the impossible and found a way to do the impossible—make the entertainment industry serve the interests of the artist.

WHICH WAY FOR JAY-Z NOW?

Jay-Z has carefully crafted his rags-to-riches story about his rise from Marcy Projects to the heights of the industry. Yet there are other narratives that Jay-Z espouses that offer more complex, potentially damaging sentiments. Different from other artists at the time of his first album, Jay-Z represented a new type of gangsta: one who was slightly remorseful about his activities, reflective about his life in the streets, and almost apologetic about his past. However, his bravado, confrontational attitude, and reliance on violence pose problematic and yet understandable narratives that many black men face. These problematic tropes in how black masculinity is articulated in hip hop come out of real, lived experiences. The systemic racial profiling of black men by city, state, and federal law enforcement institutions; the incredible rates at which they are imprisoned; and the extent to which they are used as free labor in the prison system (reinstituting slavery in ways that seem to disassociate it from past formations) all point to an extremely hostile context. Hence, the bravado in hip hop music, albeit repetitive and somewhat predictable, may also be a response to the difficulty of negotiating an impossible situation. On the other hand, there may be a point where hypermasculine rhetoric can become a hindrance to saving black maleness from the onslaught of society, in effect becoming toxic and self-destructive. Regardless, Jay-Z’s legacy may
require further study, along with the extent to which his persona has influenced (for better or worse) how black males are perceived.

The critical question for Jay-Z and his legacy is whether or not his work falls into a new age of minstrelsy or a planned, strategic approach to redefining the potential for artistic success. If the former is the case, then Jay-Z has merely fulfilled the legacy of many that have come before him and played to the fantasies that many already have regarding black males. He has advocated stereotypes about black males and violence, sex, misogyny, drug selling, trafficking women as prostitutes, and material ownership over speaking out on societal issues.

However, if Jay-Z’s actions were the product of a planned assault on the record industry, then he has succeeded. His current worth is rumored to be roughly around $320 million, a staggering amount that few artists (in any genre) have managed to achieve. His position as CEO of Def Jam puts him into a key position to generate new artistic careers, while manipulating the direction of hip hop culture. His creation of Def Jam Left has essentially developed the means to bring the underground to the mainstream, and instead of trying to revamp his image into that of a conscious rapper, he has instead used his superstar status to help rappers of many styles into the business. Accordingly, Def Jam Left also seeks to help artists release their work through low-finance deals that minimize the stress of meeting record label expectations. Such a vehicle could be crucial to the restructuring of hip hop and the inclusion of the underground into the mainstream. However, on a more negative note, it could be used to keep underground artists consigned to his label, much like African American sharecroppers in post–Civil War society, by keeping them indebted, indefinitely, for minor accrued expenses. Unfortunately, only time will tell which direction Jay-Z takes this new label.

When raising the question about whether or not Jay-Z embodies negative black stereotypes in his music or has crafted a strategy for success that used such stereotypes to gain wealth and position to help others, it is more likely that the real motivations behind Jay-Z’s rise to prominence are somewhere in between, with the leadership of Def Jam as a welcome capstone to a stellar sales career. Although Jay-Z was probably quite aware that certain types of music, and the subsequent messages therein, were more appealing to mainstream audiences than others, it is unlikely that as a teen he was knowledgeable about the history behind the images and characteristics that mainstream audiences were interested in. The legacy of the brute, Zip Coon, and Sambo (three stereotypical caricatures that helped mold white attitudes and legislation about African Americans in post–Civil War America) have helped to influence how many consumers interpret black masculinity in hip hop culture. This is the terrain that the MC has to contend with if she or he is interested in selling to a large audience. In essence, Jay-Z may have developed a new way to define success, and achieve it, through a careful climb up the recording industry’s ladder. Most important, regardless of Jay-Z’s perception of his own
impact on society, he is helping to bring underappreciated MCs to the forefront. If properly executed, Jay-Z may also redefine consciousness in hip hop by creating new standards for success by making the industry more supportive of artists with alternative approaches to music and business.

See also: Tupac Shakur, Notorious B.I.G., Nas, Kanye West

WORKS CITED


FURTHER READINGS


Though Kanye West’s icon status in the annals of hip hop history is largely still a work in progress, by mid-2006 he seemed well on his way. Though neither of his two albums was awarded the coveted five-mic rating from *The Source* magazine, he came close with both records. Both 2004’s *The College Dropout* and 2005’s *Late Registration* were Billboard chart toppers with successful singles. The former’s “Jesus Walks” won the Best Rap Song Grammy for 2004, and the latter gave us “Gold Digger,” featuring celebrity titan
Jamie Foxx, “Diamonds (From Sierra Leone),” “Heard ’Em Say,” and “Drive Slow.” The singles represented a variety of sounds and were widely played in various corporate radio formats and on free and college radio as well. West was making guest appearances and producing on an ever-expanding number of high-profile records, including, in 2005, Common’s four-and-a-half-mic-rated Be (released by West’s own G.O.O.D. Music label). In addition to the Grammy for “Jesus Walks,” he had won a series of others for his own work, plus more for production and writing he had done for others. West had been included in Time’s 2005 year-end “People Who Mattered” issue and graced that magazine’s cover on August 29, 2005. Finally, and arguably most importantly, West’s solid entrenchment in various political skirmishes in wider debates over issues like censorship and minority and gay rights, in which he didn’t so much choose a side as emerge from the melee unscathed by the right or left, marked him as a singular, accessible voice not only to the so-called hip-hop generation, or the under-thirty crowd, but to a wide swath of the American public.

He’s a different sort of rapper, for sure. Counting flamboyant pink shirts and Gucci loafers among his eclectic wardrobe, he never played the hustler’s game—not traditionally, anyway. He cites Roc-A-Fella Records’ initial reluctance to take him on as a rapper, in spite of his obvious skills, as a product of this slick image, a direct opposite of the rough-hewn gangsta character of many of that label’s rappers and the outgrowth of West’s childhood, a relatively placid American life outside the black market economy of guns and drugs. What they didn’t understand at first, West told Time, was that he “had to hustle his own way.” He contends that life itself is a hustle—we all do what we have to do to get by. And somewhere therein lies his appeal. West emerged in a myopic age, when the number of bullets a man had taken seemed to represent the gauge of his possible success as a rapper. In the wake of the seemingly endless mythologizing surrounding the bullet-riddled corpses of Tupac and Biggie Smalls, West’s contemporary 50 Cent, despite debatable skills as an MC, has ridden thug appeal to its apotheosis in his success. West redefined boundaries, bringing millions of fans with him in the process. WestABut his valuable critique of hip hop’s contradictory cultural identity—his stance in opposition to homophobia, his antithug persona, his portraits of the women in his life as characters with more than a single dimension, and so on—was not only a critique. West managed via a complex strategy to at once deliver the contradictions in all their splendor. Rather than occupy a pulpit, he seemed to prefer the populist’s strategy: He walks among his fellow travelers in the game, including his fans. His lyrics, though often quite personal, just as regularly proceeded from a point of view as theatrical as that of Andre 3000 of fellow genre-benders Outkast, in which he spoke from the heart, undercutting hip hop convention, and at once played the part of the MC as it has been traditionally known—as in the work of a genre-defying novelist, there’s just enough separation between the two stances to render his message in the minds of listeners as simultaneously authentic, told from a singular perspective, and the product of
a brilliant artist with an important agenda. He is unique in this light, in addition to being among the select company of Dr. Dre and Wu-Tang’s RZA as an MC-producer to see success in both arenas simultaneously.

With two albums in the bag, by mid-2006 Kanye had played a prominent performative role in the hip hop feature film *Dave Chappelle’s Block Party* and was working on his own film, a grouping of short stories linked by a central theme and backed by his music, with multiple directors overseen by George C. Wolfe (director of the erstwhile TV miniseries *Lackawanna Blues*). He was likewise working on a third in what he’d planned as a sort of tetralogy of records connected by an overarching scholastic theme. The first sees the protagonist dropping out of school to do things his own way. On the second he’s back in; the planned third album sees his triumphant *Graduation*, to be followed hopefully by *A Good Ass Job*. The jury was out on whether West could sustain the wild success of the first two, *The College Dropout* and *Late Registration*, but he showed little sign of becoming complacent. His extreme self-confidence—many of his detractors called it arrogance and predicted it would be his tragic flaw—led him down a path toward either greatness or hubristic dissolution. But meanwhile his legacy with regard to the genre on the whole, still far from certain, was beginning to solidify.

**EARLY YEARS**

“My mama told me go to school, get your doctorate.”

*Kanye West, “Hey Mama”*

Kanye Omari West was born June 8, 1977, to Donda and Ray West, then living in Atlanta, Georgia, the latter a former Black Panther and prize-winning photographer, the former an English professor who would find work at Chicago State University when Kanye was three. Ray and Donda, who had separated when he was eleven months old, would likewise split for good around that time, an event to have significance in their son’s later musical output. Still, Donda describes Kanye’s childhood as relatively serene and middle class, and says that from early on her son had an artistic temperament. He lived during his early years in the area of 79th Street and Lake Michigan on Chicago’s south side but attended Polaris High School in an inner-ring suburb. Through it all, though, he remained connected to the city’s vibrant hip hop scene, in which he met the producer-DJ No I.D., with whom he became fast friends, learning to sample and program beats after he got his first sampler at age fifteen.

No I.D. was working at the time with young rapper Lonnie Rashid Lynn, then known as Common Sense, who would go on to drop the “Sense” (after a dispute with a West Coast reggae group using the same name) and inject a fresh spoken-word-style poetic consciousness into rap music, a style and
approach to hip hop lyricism that would come to be associated with Chicago. This style eschewed the growing gangsterism of the scenes on the East and West coasts and in the South in favor of style and content reflective of the lives of common people, also infusing traditional hip hop’s repetitive beats and simplistic song structures with complicated rhythmic cadences and hooks worthy of pop songs, often sampled directly from them. But Common at the time was still a relatively unknown artist outside of the Chicago scene. Over the years, as Common’s career began to take off, West worked out his production chops and became enamored of rising coastal rap stars of the mid-1990s, groups like Wu-Tang Clan and the Queensbridge, New York, rapper Nas, “people that sold records,” he told Vibe’s Noah Callahan-Bever in a 2005 cover story. But Common’s influence on West was clear as well. As No I.D. tells it, West was always on Common’s case to let West produce beats for him, but the latter’s headstrong nature prevented it from happening. West’s youth and imitation of New York rhyme styles conspired with Common’s arrogance to prevent the union from happening, but the two did enjoy a budding friendship, and on the part of Common a grudging admittance of the younger West’s budding skills—the two even battled in 1996, at a time when Common was at the apex of his popularity. As Kanye says, “He knew that I had a spark lyrically, otherwise he wouldn’t have let me battle him.”

West got a scholarship to attend Chicago’s American Academy of Art to study painting but shortly thereafter transferred to Chicago State University, where his mother taught, as an English major. But he also began to get a few breaks as a producer. Around this time, among his first major beats sold were to Chicago rapper Gravity and Bad Boy Records’ Mase. His class schedule wouldn’t allow him to devote the time to his production work he felt he needed, so against his mother’s wishes he dropped out. This move would define the young man’s future work. His first album as an MC, The College Dropout (2004), would be devoted to self-affirmation, the rapper-producer’s life presented as a grand metaphor for trusting your instincts and living life your own way. His mother, Donda, told Kot, “It was drummed into my head that college is the ticket to a good life . . . but some career goals don’t require college. For Kanye to make an album called College Dropout, it was more about having the guts to embrace who you are, rather than following the path society has carved out for you.”

FROM BEATS TO BILLBOARDS

“To all the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers.”

Kanye West, “Jesus Walks”

West stayed in the Chicago scene, coming together with locals GLC, Really Doe, Timmy G, and Arrowstar to form the Go Getters (working with local
promoter John Monopoly), whose shows for a time electrified the Chicago club scene and eventually landed them airplay—of the single “Oh, Oh, Oh”—on local black music FM giant WGCI and other stations. The group also put West in touch with Craig Bauer’s Hinge Studios, where most of the Go Getters’ output was produced, and it would be from this base that West began to really extend feelers into the national scene. But it wasn’t until he moved to Hoboken, New Jersey in 2001, across the Hudson River from New York City, that his career as a producer took off. In 2000 he’d done work from the Hinge base for both Lil’ Kim and Jay-Z (a track on, respectively, Notorious K.I.M. and The Dynasty: Roc la Familia), but now his popularity soared with his work for Jay’s record The Blueprint, whose release happened to coincide with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Despite all, the album was something of an instant classic, particularly with the ubiquity of track three, “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” (the single was a Billboard Top 10), which prominently included a sped-up sample from the Jackson Five’s “I Want You Back.” This technique of speeding up samples, which West adapted from Wu-Tang Clan’s RZA, quickly became the young producer’s signature. It marked a shift that followed trends in other genres away from electronics-heavy production and back to the earthy feel of 1970s music, in this case the soul that West and countless other up-and-coming producers knew as children. After the violence that marked 1990s hip hop and the subsequent oftentimes sharp-edged nature of the music, this approach to music making was bound to catch on. In a certain sense it harked back to the birth of the genre, as it relied on direct, earthy samples of vinyl records, imparting a soft-edged feel to the backing track, a fine contrast to Jay-Z’s microscopic flow. Also, it introduced a significant crossover appeal with its use of easily recognizable samples on an album from a prototypical gangsta rap artist, cementing the gangsta subgenre fully in the mainstream—this can at least partly be attributed to West. Shawn Carter (aka Jay-Z) called the boy a genius around this time, and The Blueprint featured a host of tracks produced by West in addition to “Izzo (H.O.V.A.),” six in total and among them the seminal “The Takeover,” the track that flamed the fires of Jay-Z’s then-budding war of words with Nas and others among his competition. The track West worked up for “The Takeover,” channeling hip hop’s early giants Run-DMC and Grandmaster Flash, borrowed from a rock song, the Doors’ “Five to One,” an audacious move in and of itself that would inspire a mostly innocuous but clearly homagelike 2004 parody by Mos Def.

But all the while West’s ambitions were to MC himself. At first, anyway, he was getting nothing but the cold shoulder from his pals at Roc-A-Fella Records, Jay-Z and Damon “Dame” Dash, who initially looked at the kid and saw a flashy joker without the authenticity required of marketable MCs in the then gangsta-dominated hip hop scene. But content or credibility wouldn’t be long in coming. On October 23, 2002, it met him head-on in a car crash in LA that put West in the same hospital where Biggie Smalls died and nearly ended his life. This event spurred him on to make his own music no matter who said
yea or nay, even if he had to quite literally rap through his teeth—his jaw was wired shut as it healed. A few days into the ordeal, still laid up in a hospital bed, he got to work, calling Dash at Roc-A-Fella and asking for a drum machine. A few weeks later, out of the hospital and back in the studio but with his jaw still wired shut, he cut “Through the Wire,” utilizing the classic Chaka Khan hit “Through the Fire” on the backing track and rapping through the cage in his mouth about the entire ordeal, doubling the vocal track at times to compensate for his compromised flow. Still, the results employed what would become his trademark singsong style, with lyrics that spelled a narrative about the crash and convalescence at once harrowing, moving, and hilarious.

In the months following he worked out other tunes for what would become his debut, and after a tentative deal with Capitol Records fell through, he presented the demo to Dash and Jay-Z—also performing at a sort of private unveiling of the new material at a New York club—and won the two over. It wasn’t simply a one-way affair, though. West’s lyrics pay tribute to his admiration for and the advice and mentorship provided by both Jay and Dash over the course of preparation for the debut. The College Dropout was released in mid-2004, and “Through the Wire” climbed the charts as its first official single—though the feel-good party hit of the year, “Slow Jamz” (with Twista and Jamie Foxx), had been released well in advance of the album to generate buzz and had already become a smash. It was a hit across the nation for its multivalent voicing, synthesizing the crooning of Foxx, Kanye’s soul-bap flow, and Twista’s rapid-fire delivery. A longtime rapper on the Chicago scene, Twista languished in obscurity for over a decade, despite his flow earning him the 1992 Guinness Book of World Records plug as the “world’s fastest rapper,” before this collaboration with West catapulted him into the mainstream with a platinum-selling album, Kamikaze, featuring West’s production (see sidebar: Fast Rappers).

Kanye and The College Dropout would garner eight Grammy nominations and win two, Best Rap Album and Best Rap Song for “Jesus Walks,” with
West sharing the latter with then little-known MC Rhymefest, who cowrote the first verse. West also shared a songwriting Grammy for his production work for Best R&B Song with Alicia Keys and Harold Lilly for “You Don’t Know My Name,” from the West-produced *The Diary of Alicia Keys*. In short, it was a smash year for the young rapper, then only twenty-seven. *The College Dropout* was a commendable first effort, and for it West drew on the credentials he’d built up and contacts he’d made during his relatively brief tenure as a big-name producer, drawing cameos from Jay-Z, Mos Def, Ludacris, Jamie Foxx, and other A-list rappers and R&B singers, to build the last rung of the bridge between early hip hop’s party music sensibility, the late-eighties political and social consciousness of acts like Public Enemy and De La Soul, and the nineties gangsta reportorial style. Track two, “We Don’t Care,” after a goofball intro by Cedric the Entertainer, is a satirical sing-along featuring a chorus with backing vocals by kids extolling the virtues of drug dealing to achieve a middle-class life. It was a strategy he was to employ to great effect across the record, which had the effect of anticipating catcalls and accusations of inauthenticity by in effect employing the double-edged theatrical sword of the satirist. “We Don’t Care” at once examines and embraces something that is commonly portrayed in our culture as the first resort of the lowlife, and in the gangsta subgenre as the exact opposite, the be-all and end-all of dog-eat-dog ghetto life, raising orphans to the height of kings—but West struck a new pitch with equal parts humor and bile by humorously portraying With his 1991 album, *Runnin' off at da Mouth*, Twista’s rapid-fire delivery set the stage for a new era of hip hop vocal style that moved away from the smoothed-out jazzy delivery of Rakim and the laid-back drawls of Too $hort and the Geto Boys. Rather than “rappin’ to the beat” as Sugarhill Gang put it on hip hop’s breakout hit, “Rapper’s Delight,” Twista rapped over and around the beat, with the tempo of his vocals sped up beyond the music. Big Daddy Kane, a fast rapper who preceded Twista, created a rapid-fire delivery that took hip hop vocals to a new level and would influence the styles of Twista, Eminem, and Outkast. Outkast, known also for the slow southern drawl of their vocals on songs such as “Ms. Jackson” and “Elevators,” brought speed rap to singles like “Bombs over Baghdad.” While speed rappers Das EFX and Fu-Schnickens built their rhyme styles from frenetic Jamaican dance hall routines, Twista’s is distinctive in that it is both faster and more controlled. Busta Rhymes, known for his gruff vocals and dance hall-influenced delivery on his work with the group Leaders of the New School, began moving toward speed rap in a 1992 guest appearance on A Tribe Called Quest’s “Scenario.” By 1999, Busta had developed a faster and smoother vocal style for “Gimme Some More.” The Eazy-E protégés Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, hailing from Cleveland, Ohio, developed speed raps that they combined with singing and harmony on songs like “First of the Month.”
drug dealing as a means to just getting by, a simple requirement of existence, just another job, driving audiences to both tears and hilarity. And not only traditional hip hop audiences. *The College Dropout* was admired by hardcore aficionados and suburban mothers, by high school kids and hip hop legends like Darryl McDaniels (aka DMC), who told *Time* that Kanye’s “Jesus Walks” had interested him in hip hop again.

Indeed, “Jesus Walks” marked West as an artist of the highest caliber and quickly became for 2004 what “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” was for 2001. It secured for West a reputation as a man fully prepared to embrace the contradictions inherent in all of our lives, not just those of the young rapper-producer on the make. West, particularly since his accident, sees God at work in his life, and “Jesus Walks” is as much a testament to this fact as it is a spiritual celebration of humanity’s imperfections. Cowritten with fellow Chicago area-bred rapper and close friend Rhymefest (aka Che Smith), the song engages the hip hop world’s aversion to spirituality in favor of hard-nosed street themes, but also it celebrates religion as a balm for the wayward soul. Rhymefest’s part in the writing of “Jesus Walks” was significant. He alerted West to the Arc Choir sample that dominates the track. He also wrote part of the first verse, and he receives half the royalties from the single’s sale. West’s detractors seized on this as proof of his lack of abilities as a writer-MC, but Rhymefest told *Time* that Kanye developed the central themes of the song (Tyrangiel).

**MYTHOLOGY, BACKLASH**

“But is it cool to rap about gold?”

*Kanye West, “Breathe In Breathe Out”*

If appealing to the everyman defined the young rapper’s goals from the beginning, and he began voicing the sentiment time and again in interviews, he certainly threw obstacles in his path toward realizing them. While West was filming the video for “Jesus Walks” celebrity prankster Ashton Kutcher, for an episode of his MTV show *Punk’d*, pulled off a stunt with a posse posing as representatives of the Los Angeles Film Commission, shutting down the shoot and confiscating the tape already shot on account of an invented rule about filming on Sundays without a permit. Kanye stole the tape back and tried to get away in a van before Kutcher appeared and the gag was up. Later that year, in November, at the American Music Awards West had been nominated in three categories. When he didn’t win, passed over in the Best New Artist category for country singer Gretchen Wilson, he delivered a postshow tirade. Speculation reigned in the tabloids, on the Web, and in the music press about what he would do at the Grammys, and during his acceptance speech for the
Best Rap Album award for *The College Dropout*, he said, holding up his trophy, “Everybody wanted to know what I would I do if I didn’t win. I guess we’ll never know.” Fans wrote it all off as endearing hubris, while critics scoffed. Meanwhile, certain hip hop bloggers were calling him gay for his high-fashion sensibility, among a host of other insults, one particularly over-the-top trickster calling himself “Bol Guevara” even having gone so far as to launch an ill-fated campaign to ban West from the Grammys. In Chicago, West’s hometown, the hard-core scene flourished in reaction to his popularity. On the Web site of Molemen Records, the label and production unit anchored by the duo of Panik and PNS, chat boards posts with titles like “Kanye West is a sensitive fag” took issue with West’s perceived hypocrisy with regard to his upbringing. On *The College Dropout*, West frequently shouts out to Chicago’s South Side, a term commonly reserved for anything in the city limits south of Madison and east of Ashland. Though West lived most of his childhood in the city, his attendance at a suburban high school garnered mockery and gave rise to the false impression that he’d grown up outside the city. Said one post on the Molemen board, “not that there’s anything wrong w/being from the burbs, as long as you don’t scream ‘South Side!’ on every song.” While such a sentiment is uncharitable at best and simply erroneous, the fact remains that West wasn’t above the mythologizing that so often sells hip hop acts, despite his claims to the contrary. The final track on *College Dropout* was “Last Call,” in which West capped the overall heteroglossia of the record with an extended narrative about his career, essentially telling the story told above—from Roc-A-Fella’s early dismissal of West as an MC to the broken deal with Capitol Records to finally seeing the album through production and distribution. The intent seems to be an airing of grievances—West letting fans know that he holds nothing against his cohorts for dismissing him for so long—combined with jubilation at impending success. But the effect is to build a mythology around West, clearly a multi-talented artist, to imbue his simple skills with a sort of rags-to-riches, Chicago ghetto to East Coast stardom narrative—or one marked by the ever-bankable pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps motif. The story was, at its core, generally true, but its exaggeration, like the hard-core gangsta posing of N.W.A.’s Ice Cube, served to create something akin to myth more than the true story of a man making his way in the world, something listeners could view not as an empathetic so much as an archetypal American story.

At the same time, West was gunning for his place among the great rappers, and seemed to want to be remembered as the man who gave us America as it was, the authentic representation. He took reporters to task for misrepresentation, for overmythologizing him. When commentators singled him out as unique in music for writing, producing, and performing the majority of his own tracks—breaking what sometimes seemed like an impermeable barrier in the pop hip hop world, with the rare exceptions of Dr. Dre and Wu-Tang’s RZA—he typically responded by placing himself in a long line of
producer-performers, including one of the greatest, Stevie Wonder. If Kanye’s
dual producer-MC role didn’t mark him as particularly unique, the authen-
ticity of the final product certainly benefited from it. West the consummate
artist proved to indeed know best. As with the lyrical content of “Jesus
Walks,” the true artist in West wholly embraced the contradictions inherent
in the producer-performer relationship. The act of creation for West became
an exercise in self-consciousness. This quality does make him unique to the
hip hop genre. Like the work of certain postmodernist playwrights and nove-
lists who take the genre in which they work and their own creative processes
and make them the very subjects about which they write, West’s rhymes often
lay bare the structure that underlies them, or take up the mantle of a hip hop
convention only to expose the pose for what it really is at the same time. This
schizophrenic style—though previously utilized in lesser degrees by lesser
artists—has never been grasped and laid bare with so much exuberance, an
achievement that showcases not only West’s performative and production
skills but his knowledge of the genre’s history and conventions, and a fine
sense of what life in America really is.

A *College Dropout* track called “Breathe In Breathe Out,” about what West
calls “ice rap,” featured none other than iceman par excellence Ludacris on an
absolutely frigid chorus, Ludacris shouting above a slow crunk-esque track a
sort of pseudo call-and-response to himself, the very picture of the tough-man
rapper on the street. And West sets up a grand contradiction in his verse,
apologizing at once to Mos Def and Talib Kweli, the Black Star duo known
for their meaningful verse (and one of West’s early tours was with none other
than Kweli himself, whom he went out with unpaid just to learn the tricks of
the trade), for rapping about the same old stuff—cash, women, and rims—
when he really wanted to say something with some substance behind it, then
playing the part of the ice rapper straight up. He undercuts it all with self-
conscious lines that expose the lie. The blogger Bol called this track “one of the
better songs on the album,” perhaps missing half of its satirical message, that
the posing machismo of the hip hop community is empty and useless, at best a
cynical put-on crafted to sell records, at worst mean-spirited and bigoted.

In his less theatrical moments on *The College Dropout*, West brings across
a simple message. On “All Falls Down,” another single, West tells the story of
life in an America obsessed with material gain by comparing himself to a
prototypical character—a young student whose eyes are opened to the use-
lessness of her college major and who drops out to work full-time as a hair-
dresser. The ensuing economic hardship—including all the useless purchases
made along the way—West casts as a quintessential American story, putting it
up next to his own experience spending way too much on watches and cars
while ignoring what he really needs.

And in the end the naysayers were far outnumbered by the admirers
the nation over. With his Grammys in the bag, the man kept his course,
preparing for his next offering even while picking up production work for
ever-higher-profile acts. His mother retired from her chair position in the English department at Chicago State and went to work for her son as his general manager. She remained proud and dedicated. West devoted a song to her on the next record, the much-ballyhooed “Hey Mama,” in which he assured her he was going back to school. It was a metaphorical school, of course, but nevertheless she continued to be an inspiration and a source of comfort and pride for the young man.

ETERNAL RETURN

“Ahh . . . the sweet taste of victory.”
Kanye West on Common’s “They Say”

West amped releases from his new record label, G.O.O.D. Music, an acronym for Getting Out Our Dreams, putting out in 2005 both John Legend’s R&B debut Get Lifted and Common’s much-anticipated comeback, Be. Both were platinum sellers, were produced by West, and would see accolades of their own. Legend was a sort of child prodigy pianist whose work with Lauryn Hill, Alicia Keys, and West himself, among others, was marking him as a talent to be reckoned with as far back as 1998. Kanye’s production on his first solo effort launched him into the popular consciousness as a veritable star. Get Lifted was nominated for eight Grammy Awards and ended up winning three. And Common, who by now needed no more convincing of West’s skills, allowed Kanye free rein on the production work for Be, and West contributed rhymes to a number of the tracks. West is credited by many with fully reviving the elder rapper’s career. Common’s previous endeavor, 2002’s Electric Circus, was the prototypical “ambitious” effort, an album that unabashedly attempted to combine hippie feel-good mysticism and rock and roll with hip hop, with its Beatlesque cover art (most closely resembling the cover of Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band) and flower-child song titles like “Aquarius,” “Jimi Was a Rock Star,” and others. Common remained without a new release until May 24, 2005, when Be debuted. It promptly garnered accolades, standing up well against Electric Circus. Where the latter had traded in expansive pseudo rock-anthem styles, West’s tracks put Common back in touch with his roots in R&B, hip hop, and earnest spoken word. “They Say,” a track on which both West and John Legend appeared, represented a perfect synergy between these elements—with a vintage West track utilizing a sample from Miles Davis pianist Ahmad Jamal and Legend’s vocals to provide an old-soul feel, over which Common spun his free-form spoken-word rhymes, responding to criticism of his past efforts directly and, generally, making a triumphant return. “They Say” garnered a Grammy nomination for Best Rap/Sung Collaboration, and Be got the nod for Best Rap Album.
West and Common both were jubilant over the record, on the whole. West was understandably proud, considering his and Common’s relationship going back to their early days in Chicago. West told All Hip-Hop.com, “I’m telling you right now it’s five mics, five stars across the board. . . . Common’s album will go down in history” (Williams and Hope). Later on in the same story, Common slapped West on the back for his work in bringing him back to the basics, and a good piece forward at the same time, but still spoke to a great deal of the speculation then reigning in the press that West was the main force behind the album, saying, “Only I truly can bring back me, however he is helping me to create music that the masses and people can enjoy and love. . . . I have to give credit where it is due. Kanye has been a big plus to my album and this new part of my career and that is why we are riding together.” “He’s not going back, he’s going forward,” Kanye said. “There are songs on there that only me and Common could have done together.”

And in the end, Source gave the album four and a half mics—West bickered about it in the press a bit, but at that point his label was at least fully off the ground. That wouldn’t be the end of an already great year for the rapper-producer. Both of his label’s artists would be eclipsed in 2005 by West himself. His second disc, Late Registration, broke on the airwaves in summer with the single “Diamonds (From Sierra Leone),” a track whose lyrics, in a manner similar to that of “All Falls Down,” laid bare a personal story while self-consciously engaging the political-cultural issue of diamonds borne of violent African conflict. But though “Diamonds” made a bit of splash for West as a track with strong content, it didn’t break the Top 40 on Billboard’s Hot or Pop 100 lists. It would be another track entirely, which appeared shortly afterward with the release of the album, “Gold Digger” (about women who chase rich men, in which West urges women to stay with their broke-slob boyfriends—the punchline being that even if they stay true their men are likely to leave them for white girls) that made the biggest waves, propelled by a bouncy dance beat and a cameo from Jamie Foxx doing Ray Charles’s “I Got a Woman,” as well as the occasional sample of Ray himself. The song was a runaway hit and climbed the pop charts to number one—ending its tenure there only after a lengthy ten-week run—by which time West had made an even bigger mark on the U.S. public.

POLITICS

“Who gave Saddam anthrax? George Bush got the answers.”
Kanye West, “Crack Music”

By the advent of Late Registration, West’s perceived authenticity, combined with his obvious ability to lure a public outside hip hop’s traditional audience, was further marking him as the genre’s most important artist. The album’s
release, after being repeatedly pushed back, happened on August 30, 2005, one
day after Hurricane Katrina made landfall just east of New Orleans on the
Gulf Coast. It was a manic day that would undoubtedly be imprinted in the
minds of Americans for years to come, as the airwaves rocked with pictures
and reporting from New Orleans, a city by the end of the day nearly 80 percent
underwater. But just as Jay-Z’s *The Blueprint* rose from the ashes of the 9/11
attacks, the New Orleans tragedy would ultimately buoy West’s profile.

Earlier that summer, he had already entered the realm of political exchange
with his participation in the Philadelphia event in the Live 8 series of concerts
held globally to pressure world leaders at a then-imminent G8 summit in
Scotland to, among other things, relieve the world’s poorest countries of their
debts. West risked a lawsuit from promoters of a previously scheduled per-
formance to take part, and among the media hype surrounding the show,
West spoke out about the African AIDS epidemic, endorsing the view that
AIDS is a manmade disease foisted upon the world’s poorest by its richest.
The inflammatory comments, delivered to MTV News, caused head-scratch-
ing for many, and others, including various media pundits, seized on them to
deride West’s and the rest of hip hop culture’s tendency to believe in various
“conspiracy theories.” West, as he’s done with many different issues, would
invoke his past, citing his parents as having taught him about injustice in the
world—this issue was simply one of many, he said, for which he would work
on behalf of those less well off in the world.

Two weeks before *Late Registration*’s release, West walked out on a host at
Toronto’s Flow 93.5 FM in protest of the station’s bleeping of the phrase
“white girl” on “Gold Digger.” Before storming out, he was attempting to
make his ire known on-air to the program director, and when the host, Holly-
wood Rich, wouldn’t quit interrupting him, he shoved the table and walked
out. Flow later stopped censoring the phrase.

Then on August 22, a week prior to the album’s official release, MTV aired
“All Eyes on Kanye West,” West’s spot in the well-known interview series. In
conversation with Sway Calloway, West dropped a bomb on the heads of
haters and the hip hop community in general with a forceful outcry against
homophobia in rap music. West came to the issue in response to a question
Calloway proffered about his mother’s influence on his life. As with the
African AIDS issue, Kanye’s response was typical only in that he once again
defied his audience’s expectations. After West’s parents’ divorce, the young
man saw his father at “Christmas, spring break, and summer,” he said. Con-
sequently, the majority of the time his mother was the figure on which he
modeled himself. He said, “It gets to the point that when you go to high
school and you wasn’t out in the streets like that, and you ain’t have no father
figure, or you wasn’t around your father all the time, who you gonna act like?
You gonna act like your mother. … And then everybody in high school be
like, ‘Yo, you actin’ like a fag. Dog, you gay?’” West’s response to this sort of
treatment, he said, was to become the opposite—an overt homophobe.
“Anybody that was gay I was like, ‘Yo, get away from me,’” he told Calloway. “And like Tupac said, ‘Started hangin’ with the thugs,’ and you look up and all my friends were really thugged out.” But then he learned that one of his close relatives, his “favorite cousin,” was gay, and he renounced his views. During the interview, he urged fellow MCs to stop their continual bashing of gays. “I wanna just come on TV and just tell my rappers, just tell my friends, ‘Yo, stop it fam’” (see sidebar: Hip Hop Homophobia).

It was a courageous position to take, in a world in which even Mos Def—among the more socially conscious of rappers—flings around antigay epithets

### Hip Hop Homophobia

*Mickey Hess*

Homophobic lyrics have existed in hip hop at least since hip hop’s first commercial record, Sugarhill Gang’s 1979 single “Rapper’s Delight,” in which Sugarhill calls Superman a “fairy” and compares his superhero costume to pantyhose. Homophobia is rampant in lyrics, where MCs often assert their dominance over competitors by feminizing them and calling them homosexuals, using terms like “bitch,” “fag,” and “homo” to emasculate them.

On August 22, 2005, Kanye West called for an end to homophobic insults in lyrics. He suggested on MTV’s “All Eyes on Kanye West” that hip hop’s treatment of gays as second-class citizens mirrored the treatment endured by African Americans over the past century in the United States. West’s statements regarding being raised by his mother and adopting feminine traits from her recalled the 1965 publication *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, also known as the Moynihan Report, in which Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan suggested that an increase in female-headed households in African American communities would feminize the young black men who grew up with no father present. Moynihan’s report remains controversial because of its stereotypical depiction of African American families as poor and uneducated, and because it undermines the accomplishments of black women by suggesting that they are emasculating their sons.

In hip hop lyrics masculinity equals power, and in rap battles MCs seek to emasculate their opponents. The lyrics generated in certain gangsta rap beefs recall male prison culture, where dominance can be asserted in sexual terms. To be claimed as another inmate’s “bitch” means that a prisoner can be sexually dominated by that inmate. Many gangsta rappers, who embrace criminal culture, reflect prison culture in their lyrics as they threaten to sodomize their enemies. After Ice Cube left N.W.A. over what he considered an unfair contract, the remaining members of the group recorded “A Message to Benedict Arnold,” in which they called Cube a traitor and threatened to shave his head and sodomize him with a broomstick. Cube responded with the track “No Vaseline,” in which he threatened to sodomize Eazy-E in retaliation. These threats didn’t stop within the group. On “Dre Day,”
on his records, and the blowback was extreme from certain quarters: Rumors circulated, for instance, that West himself was gay. His ode to his mother, “Hey Mama,” didn’t help matters: Various critics pointed to it as further proof. In early 2006, West addressed the issue with Rolling Stone’s Lola Ogunnaike, “I knew there would be a backlash, but it didn’t scare me, because I felt like God wanted me to say something about that.”

A week after “All Eyes on Kanye West” aired, the Time cover story had West deliberating the use of the word nigger in his music (Tyrangiel). He described his attempt to negotiate its use in the chorus of the song “Crack Music,” on Late Registration, by saying “homey” instead, which he felt didn’t have the same effect on his listener. Another week later, after Late Registration had hit stores and Hurricane Katrina had done its work on the Gulf Coast, it was anger and frustration that moved West to make his most visible political

Dr. Dre threatened to sodomize Luther Campbell, whose song “Cowards in Compton,” disrespected Dr. Dre and the city he represents in his music.

“Dre Day” also displays homophobia when Dre’s partner, Snoop Dogg, claims that Campbell’s mother is “A Frisco dyke.” This type of homophobic name calling is common in hip hop lyrics. In his first two albums, Eminem frequently used the terms fag and faggot, yet claims that he does not intend the terms to be homophobic or hateful, but only to designate weakness. Eminem’s detractors argue that the origins of these terms as disparaging slang for homosexuals give his usage of them the connotation that being gay equals being weak. In response to his critics, Eminem invited the gay British singer Elton John to perform a duet at the 2001 Grammy Awards. At the end of their performance of Eminem’s “Stan,” Elton John hugged the young rapper. The performance was boycotted by GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

Works Cited


Further Readings

pronouncement of the summer. He joined comedian Mike Myers for a spot on NBC’s “Concert for Hurricane Relief” benefit on Friday, September 2. The comedian followed the teleprompter, but West, visibly nervous, deviated from the script, saying in a halting, near-breathless voice, “I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, ‘They’re looting.’ You see a white family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food.’ And, you know, it’s been five days [for many stranded families, waiting for help] because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch. I’ve even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I’m calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give, and just to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there. So anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help—with the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible. I mean, the Red Cross is doing everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way—and they’ve given them permission to go down and shoot us!” West referred to developments at the time—widespread reports of violent looting, snipers shooting at Coast Guard helicopters from New Orleans rooftops, and other incidents—that were cause for National Guard soldiers to be issued a directive to shoot if fired upon. The reports later proved to be wildly exaggerated or simply wrong: In moving testimonial after testimonial on the radio program This American Life and in other venues, eyewitnesses debunked the tales of rape and murder at the convention center and other reports of lawlessness, largely validating West’s indignation.

After West’s deviation from the awards-show script—the comedian Myers now completely ruffled but determined to follow the teleprompter to the letter—West’s eyes darted back and forth as he waited for Myers to wrap up. When he did, he passed back to West, who then delivered a line that would sit in the minds of Americans for weeks to come: “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.”

The network’s monitors, who routinely watch the live feed (typically running on a several-second delay before broadcast) for obscenities to bleep, didn’t realize West had deviated from the script because he hadn’t used an obscenity, but by the time he delivered this last line they’d been well informed, and Myers only got out “Please call” before the broadcast cut to comedian-actor Chris Tucker, who continued with another scripted message. In a half-triumph for free speech, NBC only cut West’s comment about the president from the later West Coast feed, but the damage was done. As personal messages and media reports echoed around the land, it would be that line that resonated; and with it, the conscience of a nation reeled.

West joked about it, after a time. In a later conversation with All Hip-Hop.com, the rapper said, “Like honestly, right now I was eating some chicken and [if] I had choked on this chicken bone right now people would never hear the
end of it. I can have no honest death now. I can’t go out in the street, trip and bump my head [because] people would be saying ‘They put special government grease on the floor!’ If anything, [the government] would want to try and keep me as safe as possible” (Williams). But at the time he was dead serious, and as if in response, the next week “Gold Digger” began its reign on the pop charts, followed by Kanye’s third single, “Drive Slow” (see sidebar: Drive Slow: Hip Hop and Car Culture), and Late Registration sales skyrocketed.

Reactions to all these developments were widely varied. The usual suspects among his detractors accused West of simply being provocative in order to boost the profile of his new record. Some seized on “Diamonds (From Sierra Leone)” and its two versions on the record in an attempt to neutralize the

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**Drive Slow: Hip Hop and Car Culture**

*Mickey Hess*

Kanye West’s 2006 single “Drive Slow,” featuring Chicago’s GLC and Houston’s Paul Wall, fits into a long tradition of hip hop songs about cars, cruising, and sound systems. In 1988, Seattle’s Sir Mix-A-Lot released “Posse on Broadway,” a song about cruising down the strip in Mix-A-Lot’s “home away from home,” his Mercedes Benz limo. Sir Mix-A-Lot parodied his own use of cars as a status symbol one year later, with the 1989 single “My Hooptie,” which described his backup vehicle, a car with mismatched tires, a broken stereo, a dragging tailpipe, and a broken bumper. Mix-A-Lot explains in the song that his hooptie is reserved for when his Benz is at the mechanic. Like “Posse on Broadway,” LL Cool J’s 1990 single “The Boomin’ System” is devoted to exalting the pleasures of driving around, bumping his music. Masta Ace’s “Jeep Ass Nigga” (1992) defiantly calls out police for harassing black teenagers for playing their car stereos at high volume. LL and Masta Ace focus more on describing their sound systems than their cars, but the act of cruising is what links these hip hop songs together. From New York’s Jeeps and Land Cruisers to LA’s lowriders and 1964 Impalas to the Dirty South’s Cadillacs, hip hop music is made for the cars as well as the clubs.

Releases such as Masta Ace’s *Sittin’ on Chrome*, Three 6 Mafia’s “Riding Spinners” and “Swervin’,” and Mike Jones and Paul Wall’s “Still Tippin’” all speak about wheels, rims, and customized cars. In 2004, West Coast rapper Xzibit became the host of an MTV series, *Pimp My Ride*, in which he takes old, broken-down cars and has them customized for their owners. The technicians at West Coast Customs, the car shop featured on the series, often add televisions, video game consoles, and other electronics to the vehicles. In-car televisions are a status symbol for Paul Wall, who mentions them on Kanye’s “Drive Slow” as well as on his guest verse on Three 6 Mafia’s “Swervin’,” another song devoted to cars and cruising.

The link between hip hop, cruising, and car culture has led to problems at events like Atlanta’s Freaknik festival, which took place each April during Black...
College Weekend (also called Black Spring Break), and drew upward of 250,000 people. Freaknik ended in 2000, after the city of Atlanta experienced gridlock and increased criminal activity during the event. Cruising is also an issue for Louisville’s Kentucky Derby and has overworked that city’s police department in an attempt to control traffic, drug use, and assaults. In Louisville’s West End, Derby cruising can involve an estimated 200,000 people, and in 2000 led to 158 arrests. Cruising became such a draw on the city’s resources that year that city alderman promoted a free hip hop concert at the Louisville waterfront, intended to draw fans out of their cars and away from their West End neighborhoods. The concert plans fell through because of security concerns, and the tradition of Derby cruising continued through 2006, when Louisville imposed a formal ban on cruising.

force of Kanye’s ascendant political engagement. The more politically inspired of the two versions, the first on the album and featuring a guest spot from Jay-Z, was not the single that was released. The single’s lyrics, while clever in spots, showed West simply responding to the various criticisms that had arisen in the wake of *The College Dropout* and the various awards show fiascos. The first version on the album, though, was a direct engagement of Americans’ (and West’s in particular) fetishizing of the gemstone and the subsequent violent conflict the fetish has fueled in African countries. The verses are peopled with children missing limbs and Kanye agonizing over his Roc-A-Fella chain. It was a prototypical display of West’s double-edged approach to hip hop lyricism. Critics accused him of acquiescing to the music—or, worse, the diamond—industry and, worse still, theft: Chicago MC Lupe Fiasco freestyled over the track during a session with West, resulting in a mixtape track called “Conflict Diamonds,” and certain critics questioned West’s authorship of his own take.

But as a testament to the prevailing opinion, in *Slate* Hua Hsu called him “Hip-hop’s Hamlet” and lauded him for his injection of conscience into the spirit of pop music. Hsu also noted West’s many flaws, pointing out that *Late Registration* worked for much the same reason *The College Dropout* did, thus making it something of a repetitive endeavor, its most powerful songs soliloquies about moral contradictions, the central one being the same materialism versus authenticity theme addressed in “All Falls Down” and other tracks on *Dropout*. But Hsu left no doubt that West’s record was the best-sounding thing to come across the pop transom in a long time, though he attributed that to the rapper’s sharing production credits with Jon Brion, renowned for his work with Fiona Apple and other rock acts, whom West admired for his ability to sweeten up tracks as a producer with real instrumentation. On “Diamonds (From Sierra Leone)” Brion added a haunting chorus of strings to darken the mood of the track. He made possible Maroon 5 crooner Adam Levine’s vocal on “Heard ’Em Say” and overall he lent years of experience to
young West’s bombastic studio energy. Seemingly following his albums’ educational motif, with *Late Registration* West was indeed back in school.

As on *The College Dropout*, there was something for everyone on the record. As evidenced above, West’s winking, self-conscious swagger was in full effect on tracks like “Gold Digger” and “Diamonds,” but he’d taken it all to a significantly higher level of intensity. Where *Dropout* had been slightly giddy in its youthful exuberance, *Late Registration* was more sober, downbeat, dark, and morally focused if eclectic. On “Heard ’Em Say,” the opening track, the rapper riffs further on the notion that AIDS was invented to oppress communities of color and engages the hypocrisy of America and the first world’s elite. The pose struck is of an embattled yet proud American telling his story to an unreceptive audience. The overall mood of the song, with Levine’s melancholy guest vocals, is soulful and almost mournfully contemplative. Then there’s the searing “Crack Music,” with its dark strings, propulsive beat, symphonic backing vocals, and tough message. The lyrics riff on an archetypal hip hop trope, as of course the “crack” of the title is the eponymous narcotic and the extended metaphor depicts hip hop music as both borne of and a remedy for addiction and the trials of life in general. On this song, West waxes overtly political as well, again picking up an old notion, or conspiracy theory, that crack cocaine was introduced in black communities by the American government as a way to temper the inroads the militant Black Panther Party had made there—along with certain more contemporary topics, such as the hypocrisy of American foreign policy (“Who gave Saddam anthrax?”). “Crack Music” rose above the kind of reportorial gangsta chronicles of pushing rocks of the days of yore—the song’s overall approach is to exist through engagement of Jay-Z’s “bricks to billboards” metaphor for West’s rise to stardom as a monument, or a memorial of sorts, a look back at the truth of the history of hip hop as a genre. West’s aggressive tone and cadence are sufficiently exaggerated to create a kind of presentational or narrative distance from the material at hand.

Finally the symphonic, uplifting “We Major”—featuring a guest spot from another of West’s idols, and one of Jay-Z’s enemies, Nas—though equally rich production-wise, turned lyrically on a sort of spiritual exultation at generational and personal success. Anticipating Jay-Z’s possible objections to Nas’s inclusion on the record, as West told Sway Calloway, he went out of his way to make the song “Jay’s favorite song on the album. . . . When you hear the horns on ‘We Major’ and you hear the chorus come in and you hear Nas, that could like warm somebody’s heart. Good music can break through anything and maybe start to break down the wall between two of the greatest MCs that we have.” Indeed, at a New Jersey concert Thursday, October 27, that very year, Jay brought Nas onstage to bury the hatchet. “This is for hip hop,” he told the crowd.

The whole of *Late Registration* had a greater continuity of sound than West’s previous effort, and he capitalized on every opportunity to pack the
lyrics with more serious stuff than that on Dropout. The end result is a record that communicates a fantastic range of American experience. The obligatory skits, too, made a more cohesive picture than the occasionally, some said, bizarre antieducation rants on Dropout. The idea behind them was a bunch of broke dudes banding together to form a fraternity—Broke Phi Broke—to celebrate life without money, a world outside of the material American culture. The men share a single pair of pants and take pride in giving up their girlfriends to the guys with cars—they can’t afford to buy gas, anyway, much less a vehicle. Kanye, of course, is a charter member, but by the last of these skits he’s begun cheating, making beats for cash on the side. He gets caught with a new pair of shoes and is then summarily admonished by the group’s leader. Again, West brazenly embraces a contradiction at the core of contemporary American life: the need to belong, to fit in, with your fellow humans versus the Darwinistic mad grab at material things, success in the latter being the very definition of success in our culture.

But Hsu was right in saying that Late Registration operated on the whole in a manner very similar to Dropout, as the record is infused with this singular embrace of contradictory impulses and is very much about West himself. It remained on Billboard’s best-seller charts for months; even as the Grammys approached, in late January 2006, it stood at number twenty-nine, having been out for over five months. The record had garnered nominations for Album, Record (for “Gold Digger”), and Rap Album of the Year, plus five others, including nods for a couple cowriting and collaborative credits on songs by Mariah Carey, Alicia Keys, and John Legend. Legend, whose debut was released by Kanye’s own label, garnered eight nominations himself. West was in top form, telling Rolling Stone’s Lola Ogunnaike in that magazine’s cover story one week prior to the event, “Don’t ask me what I think the best song of last year was, because my opinion is the same as most of America’s… It was ‘Gold Digger.’” Ogunnaike went on, “Just to be clear, he would also like the Album of the Year Grammy, thank you very much.” In a moment of seeming humility in the piece, West disavowed his nomination for Best Rap/Sung Collaboration, for his work on Common’s “They Say,” only to then admit, “Not to sound arrogant, but how was ‘They Say’ nominated over ‘Heard ’Em Say,’ and how was that song nominated over ‘Gold Digger’?” (The last featured Jamie Foxx in Ray Charles mode, be reminded.)

LEGACY

“I’m tryin to right my wrongs”

Kanye West, “Touch the Sky”

Meanwhile, back in Chicago, in West’s wake the scene crawled with major-label scouts looking to scoop up the next talent. Molemen MC Vakill’s Worst
Fears Confirmed (though an indie release on Molemen Records) was being highly touted in both the alternative and mainstream press. Rhymefest (who cowrote “Jesus Walks”) had nabbed a major deal with J-Records, an Arista imprint, and his debut, Blue Collar, was scheduled for a 2006 release. Bump J and Lupe Fiasco (who guested on “Touch the Sky” on Late Registration) had both also been scooped up by major labels. The perception of Chicago’s scene lived on, now even in the minds of its principal participants. Indeed, much of what little local resentment appeared with West’s success had died down, and his hometown seemed proud. But though his presence was felt via his continuing production work with local MCs, West was long gone, renovating a loft in Manhattan and building a sort of dream headquarters in California. In Ogunnaike’s Rolling Stone story, West introduces the journalist to his home-in-progress in the Hollywood Hills. But as Ogunnaike portrayed him, West is ever on the move, working till the wee hours in the studio on his next offering, even as the Grammys approached to recognize his endeavors of the past year.

The cover image of that issue of Rolling Stone ignited a firestorm of both criticism and glee, as it featured Kanye done up in caked-on fake blood and wearing a crown of thorns—tagged of course with the hackneyed headline “The Passion of Kanye West.” Fundamentalist Christians, predictably, decried it as sacrilege—dedicated fans couldn’t praise it enough. The Village Voice’s “RiffRaff” blogger Nick Sylvester struck a note between the extremes and took both Kanye and Rolling Stone down a peg for disingenuous marketeering. “Beyond the fact that . . . there should be a moratorium on ‘The Passion of X’ headlines, . . . can we talk about how boring this cover is?” Sylvester wrote. “How far a cry from the truly ‘shocking’ Rolling Stone covers, be it the naked Lennon/Ono, so tender beyond the thrill of glossy flesh, or the Chili Peppers cocksocks one, which was just sorta funny? Here the shock is so transparent, the board room meeting and aha! moment so needlessly vivid, so too the night they opened up the ‘Kanye Jesus’ issue boxes and saw the cover and started laughing, hee fucking haw, about what they were about to do to the American public.” Kanye West’s over-the-top self-image and the projection of said image onto the American public seemed to have lost a bit of its crucial authenticity in the hands of the national media. After his numerous political pronouncements of the previous summer—and the ubiquity of his tracks on mainstream radio—West was perhaps suffering from overexposure. In the article, he defended himself partly (likewise attempting to explain away his braggadocio) by saying, “In America, they want you to accomplish these great feats, to pull off these David Copperfield-type stunts. . . . You want me to be great, but you don’t ever want me to say I’m great?” The blogger Bol, meanwhile, had taken to calling him “The Fudge.”

This appropriately contradictory climate followed him into the February 8 Grammy Awards show at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. West was scheduled to perform, plus he’d been nominated in eight different categories, including the coveted Album of the Year and Record of the Year (for “Gold
Digger” slots. The man arrived dressed in white from head to toe, and later gave a spirited performance of “Touch the Sky” and “Gold Digger,” refraining from using the word nigga, as he has several times in the past on television. Injecting an element of theatricality into his performance, West dressed as a high school marching band drum major leading the procession. He was playing by the rules again, but perhaps it was too late. Late Registration lost out in the Album of the Year category to U2, and Record of the Year went to pop-punk outfit Green Day. West did garner three awards, in total—in various rap categories, including Rap Album of the Year—though many interpreted it as industry backlash to his rocking the boat just a little too forcefully over the previous year. Nonetheless, his after-party was purportedly the place to be, and he basked in the glow of youth and fame. And if he resented not winning in the big categories, he mostly held his tongue that year. As if anticipating young West’s ire, Bono, U2’s lead singer, when accepting the Album of the Year award, said, “This is our second ‘album of the year,’ but we’ve lost two, Achtung Baby and All That You Can’t Leave Behind, so we know how it feels—Kanye, you’re next” (Caro).

Critical prediction had indeed favored Late Registration to win in the Best Album category. The Chicago Tribune’s Greg Kot, writing just three days prior to the awards ceremony, pointed out the impossibility of a critic or an association sifting through this morass of material, but went on to describe a coherent convergence of opinion around Late Registration. The Village Voice’s well-respected Pazz & Jop poll, a nationwide critics’ poll, had West at the top of the list for best album for the second year in a row. Kot’s choices well reflected the nationwide sentiment, though he presented skepticism about West’s actually winning.

Almost a week later in the same paper, Mark Caro looked back at the awards through the comfortable lens of a little bit of time, comparing Pazz & Jop Poll winners from years past to their Grammy counterparts and coming to similar conclusions—rarely do the two match up. Even so, Kanye West, with two Pazz & Jop top slots in a row, seemed to bear out another trend, that of critical lauding portending commercial and hence Grammy success. As Bono suggested in his shout-out to the rapper at the awards show, it was only a matter of time.

See also: Jay-Z, The Native Tongues, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg

WORKS CITED


FURTHER RESOURCES


SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY


Late Orchestration: Live at Abbey Road Studios. Universal (UK), 2006.
Formerly called Waxmaster C and born Christopher Martin, super-producer DJ Premier is often lauded as one of the top two hip hop producers of all time. There is very little that cannot be said about his achievements and milestones. For one, he has had the privilege of working with New York City’s elite MCs: Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Kool G Rap, KRS-One, Notorious B.I.G., Nas, and Jay-Z. He is also considered a remix king, having produced tracks for artists such as Mary J. Blige, Craig David, and the Black Eyed Peas. His love and passion for the culture keep him quite busy; he has a prolific career that spans over two decades and features over 500 album credits to date. Furthermore, he is one half of Gang Starr, one of hip hop’s most innovative groups. As if this were not enough, in addition to establishing his own record label, Year Round Records, DJ Premier owns HeadQcourterz Studio (formerly D&D Studio), which is a landmark in New York City hip hop history. With new projects constantly on the horizon and more wrongs needing to be corrected in the hip hop world, DJ Premier often maintains a pace that would lead the seasoned ultramarathoner to collapse from exhaustion; yet he has no retirement plans in the works. Born March 21, 1966, the recently-turned-forty-year-old b-boy is still in love with hip hop and remains loyal to his muse. Always official in his b-boy stance, the world has proven to be DJ Premier’s oyster. Here is what keeps him going.

You first put beats together in 1989, while using an SP12, but how did you learn about production?

Listening to the records that intently. I’ve always had a good ear for music. I took piano lessons when I was in the second grade and you know how boys
are, “That’s girlie stuff,” so I quit and stopped doing recitals and all that. I played sax in the band when I was playing football in high school, but I couldn’t march with the band because I was on the field. Even that, learning about notes and measures, it’s crazy because I never cared but now I see how it applies. Working with Christina Aguilera, she’s like, “Hey, I wanna do a B-section and a bridge.” I knew what a bridge was, but what was a B-section? So she explained it to me, but at least I knew measures. She had asked me what key we were in and I told her G-sharp. I know keys and all that and even if I didn’t learn all that, if I didn’t have piano lessons, I still listened intently to what made all the stuff come together. I wanted to know what each sound was and who was playing it. When it came to a drum machine, when all the records were a hard drum sound, I tried to pick that apart. The 1200s didn’t sound like the record. Since they sampled, I started to take those sounds off those records: the kick and the snare and the high hat and then, work around that. Once I started hearing other artists do it, like Marley Marl with the drums, that’s when I got it. I catch on to things fast anyway. Once you show me a couple of times, it’s in memory. Then I can take it to a greater level.

I read that you said hip hop is your Viagra. Do you still feel that way?

Yeah. It’s all about representing us as black people. Making black music that represents us and the struggle. I saw hip hop start from day one, you know, I’m forty years old, so I have an understanding of the culture and where it’s grown from. Being that it’s growing from the streets of New York, I don’t ever want to see that element die because it did a lot for me to make a career and make me a bigger person. Because of that I don’t ever disrespect it. I have a respect for music that other people don’t—they just listen to it and buy whatever’s popular. Whereas me, I’ve always been a person who makes my own judgments on what I think is good through my upbringing and my family and again, being around the culture from day one. I’m from Texas and I used to stay with my grandfather in Brooklyn back in 1973, ’74 when hip hop was just starting to grow, way before records were made. All those elements still go back to the streets of New York City and the ghetto, and most people in the ghetto are predominantly black and they’re struggling hard to maintain. Even if you look at how Harlem is now slowly but surely starting to become less culturally oriented with our own kind, it comes to us having a hold on something we can call ours.

My accountant, God bless her, before she passed away, she always used to say, “Shop in the black neighborhoods,” “Bank in the black neighborhoods,” which I still do. When she died, I still followed that. Again, it takes nothing away from my white friends or my Asian friends or other people that I’m cool with, but I still make sure that I stay grounded on knowing who I am and what my people are going through.

Hip hop is definitely the same situation, you know, the right hip hop, not all the garbage out there that’s got everybody confused. For the most part, all
that is combined in the way I'm thinking. That’s the reason why I don’t ever, ever, think that I do it wrong. I always strive on doing it right based on how I was taught. I have a lot of heroes that made me want to do it. As a consumer and a fan—which I still am—and as a DJ it’s my responsibility that I rep it right, so I stay in the mind state every time I go into the studio to bang out.

Let’s stay on this race consciousness theme for a second. I read somewhere that you enjoy reading black literature and that you attended Prairie-View, a historically black college. How does your race consciousness have an impact in the music you create? How does it become black music for you?

With hip hop, it’s automatic. The style of dress, the way we dance, all of that, even our slang, everything was created brand new from this culture and from the parties that was rocking during that era. When I was a child and didn’t have hip hop, I had Stevie Wonder and Gladys Knight, Aretha Franklin, Grover Washington, Al Green, Curtis Mayfield, the Jackson Five, James Brown, Rufus, and Chaka Khan. I had all of that as a child, and again, this was pre-scratching and mixing and cutting, pop and locking and doing windmills. I used to do all that. I used to battle all the kids in my neighborhood. One of the bigger kids was Harvey Williams, who played for the Oakland Raiders. He used to come down to the parties in the black tux and the white gloves, and he used to do the moonwalk better than Michael Jackson. I recently ran into him after damn near twenty years, and I’m telling him about me starting up my record company now, and he is saying, “Yo man, I still got a little money. If you want me to throw some of my NFL money into the label, let me know.” I told him he has to hear the music first and he’s like, “Man, if you’re doing it, I know it’s great because you always kept it raw. The stuff we came up listening to, you still keep it like that. I already trust you.” For somebody to say that, when I’m talking about borrowing a million dollars from somebody and they’re not even wanting to check the product first to see they’re not making a bad investment, that makes me feel good on the strength that he respects what I’ve done to keep this thing going. Again, respect is what makes the whole thing complete for me because [without it] then it’s fake, and I just can’t stand fake anything.

You talk a lot about your past. In looking back, how would you classify your career thus far?

I’d classify it as highly successful. That’s minus the finances, just on the love I get from all the people I looked up to in the business that I wanted to like me, told me that I was great. From Rakim to Big Daddy Kane to even KRS-One.

The people who matter.

Yeah. EPMD, like when I was still buying their records and everything. When they told me that they were feeling everything I was doing and they
wished to get with me in the studio, I felt like I had made it. I didn’t worry about the dough. I always knew in my early days, even when I was doing funny stuff in high school and my mother found out I was dealing—she never caught me—but word got around, I always knew that the financial part of it will kick in as long as you’re busting your ass. That’s something my father instilled in me, to always have a good reputation, make a name for yourself and always be responsible, which although I did not do it in the beginning—the responsibility part I was worst at—but as far as making my name known I was always a go-getter. I think it comes from my mother and my father combined because they’re both in their late seventies now and they don’t sit around. They still travel. My mother just had a major knee surgery—her second one—and she’s already going on another trip. She came to my birthday party. She came to New York to see me and I took her to Jay-Z’s place to eat. She’s into, my whole family’s into sports where my mother can tell you about the draft and really talk it like the way fellas chop it up. Not just the basics. She can talk everything from tennis to basketball to track so all that ran in our family, but music was definitely number one. I do consider myself one of the great ones. I consider myself a hall of famer. I got a nickname—instead of Mean Joe Green, I call myself Mean Joe Preem.

Well, since you consider yourself one of the great ones, one of the issues that I’ve seen with people is that once they get to that level, people start pushing them into retirement. What is left for you to accomplish?

I want to do films, in regard to directing. I’ve shot a couple of videos. I directed the “Full Clip” video for Gang Starr back when Big L passed away. That was the first one I ever shot. I’m into editing anyway because to me editing and doing pictures and putting music together—I want to do soundtrack work because all that to me is like music with just pictures. Being that I mix down all my records anyway, I can do it with visuals, getting the right actors, casting the right things, it all will turn into what I want it to be before I release it. I’m like that with my music at this point anyway. You know, if it’s something I record in the studio, even if I got a lot of money from the artist, I don’t let it leave the studio until we’re both happy. If they’re happy with it and I’m not, I’m not letting it go. I don’t care if I have to write them a check back or whatever. It has to satisfy me before it leaves the studio.

Do you consider yourself a perfectionist?

Oh, without a doubt. Definitely.

Well, I guess it has to have your seal on it, right? “Reputation is the cornerstone of power” [quoting a tattoo on his forearm]; your reputation’s on the line with every track you do. Is that how you see it?

Yeah. And I put my own self under that judgment. I know how to step outside of myself and listen to a record that I worked on. I know how to listen
to it and judge it with an open mind instead of saying just because I did it, it’s great. I don’t sweat myself like that. I think I am great, but I don’t think everything I do is incredible. So, I step outside [of myself] and with an open mind, I’ll play a record two, three, sometimes even four or five times in a row just to be sure it’s ready to go. If it’s still got me like that, then it’s a go. No matter what critics think or how they judge it, I know it’s right because I know how to listen to hip hop music. I know how to listen to music period. I know how to judge the greatness of it and the wackness of it. That’s just from my respect for it and my knowledge and the history. My knowledge of the history of music in general is very, very vast. I’m really good with these game shows . . . um . . .

Trivia shows?
Yeah. I’m real good with that.

Since we’re talking about the qualities and characteristics of your music, I’m paraphrasing, but I’ve read that you have a passion for women, food, and watches. Of the qualities and characteristics that you find appealing in those things, what translates into your music?

All of them. The women-side thing is the feeling side. Because I aim to please in all aspects. I was very close with my sisters while growing up. They taught me about women, how to kiss. One is four years older and the other is two years older. We all used to do things together, until they went to high school and started dating. I’m still very, very close with my sisters. I’m real, real close with my oldest sister. She’s the illest. Food . . .

Yeah. Your love of ice cream and cookies. I don’t see anything sweet in the music you create. It’s very aggressive.

I’m a dessert fanatic, so ice cream, cheesecake, cookies, warm brownies, all that stuff. All of that is something that you crave and I crave music just as much. So, I mean, I don’t think about the desserts when I’m making the music, but the craving—I have to satisfy that.

And watches? What about watches manifests itself in your music? What do you go for? Breitling? Rolex?
I had a Rolex years ago because as a kid I always saw that logo over on Thirty-fourth Street over by the Tourneau store. From seeing that logo I said I wanted to get one. I started getting more into watches when some friends of mine—they owned the studio I worked at, which was D&D—they were best friends with this watch dealer from the Diamond District. He used to have all these nice watches, Bertolucci, Baume & Mercier, Tag Heuer, and so I started getting into the craftsmanship of it and the mechanics. I’m into cars and working on engines. Me and my brother-in-law are building a truck right now that I’m doing from scratch. All I have is a frame. I’m buying everything,
all brand-new parts. My brother-in-law is an electrical engineer, but he builds transmissions and everything. So all of those things keep me going. All of that stuff.

Your music is supposed to be for everyone, it’s supposed to be for the common person. So when I read about your affinity for these things, I’m thinking, watches like Seiko? Especially because, if you made music that was so exclusive and for a select population, it wouldn’t be you. And I understand that you keep yourself very humble.

Without a doubt. Definitely. I’ve been with so many people in the business who have completely changed. On all types of levels. People I knew when they got their first jobs working at a record company, and I ran into them at Jay-Z’s Reasonable Doubt after-party. I was cursing them out—I’m not a troublemaker, but they were not letting me holla at Jay. They said, “Only you, but your manager has to fall back.” I’m like, “Yo, I produced on that album. I was part of that whole jump off.” My manager went to junior high and high school with Jay. He knows who he is. Jay was cool, but the people handling the access to him were being weird. I see all these other people in there—Jadakiss had like ten people and he’s my dude. But all these people in there who didn’t work on the album. I did and I can’t even bring one person. I know they’ll be apologetic, but whatever. They think they’re bigger than what they are and a lot of executives are the reason why the music is getting worse. Then they wonder why the sales are going down. They’re the reason why the sales are going down because most of them want to be famous like us. Their position is to work to push the product and now they are all playing that “I wanna be a star” game with the shades in the club, who’s got the biggest chain, the biggest watch, like crazy. It’s just bugged out how all these people changed in the last couple of years. And these are the same people who are saying how the music should sound now. I’m like, “Damn, when’s the last time you was even in the street?” I was hanging the other day with gangbangers and I didn’t see you. You can’t even walk down that same block. So it’s outta control. I call these executives at these labels murderers. Straight up. The radio station people, all that. They’re all murderers. They get no love and respect from me. I’m gonna continue to stay that way so I can keep away from all those negative energies.

In the same vein, regarding programming directors and industry executives, you’ve openly criticized radio DJs and commercial mixtape DJs for abandoning the tradition. What are some aspects that you feel are overlooked?

Being that hip hop originated in New York City, it should always be the capital of having the roots of it still exist on a big scale with the commercial stuff that’s more popular. I have nothing against Lil Jon, Paul Wall, all that stuff. I won’t make that type of music, because I am the traditional style. It’s cutting and mixing. The DJ was the major part of the rhyme back then, because the MCs would talk about “my DJ Jam Master Jay,” Mixmaster
Ice from U.T.F.O., and Roxanne came out with Howie Tee—the DJ was always the focal point.

It was DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince.

Yup. On top of all that, it has to exist in order for the culture . . . if you don’t keep that part going, it’s going to bow out eventually. So someone has to preserve that part of it. With Sirius Satellite Radio, they let me do it the way it’s supposed to be done. If I never heard the mix shows with Marley Marl and Red Alert, they way I heard it back in the early eighties, maybe I wouldn’t be doing what I do. But I heard it that way, so when I learned how to cut and scratch and mix, I was like, “All right, I got it.” And they were breaking records. It wasn’t about taking the check. I mean, if you pay for respect, you’re fake anyway. Most of these people are paying for their respect of getting their record spun. You know, payola always existed but when it comes to hip hop, even if you do it, I guess do whatever you do. But when it comes to a mix show, every single DJ has to play whatever songs are on that list. It doesn’t even sound authentic and the thing is, a mix show means that you mix your style for two or three hours, then the next person comes on and they do their style. The way it is now, it’s two or three mixes back to back, they all have to play what’s on that list, tacked on the wall. Even if they put two or three unheard-of songs, they still have to pick at least ten to fifteen songs out of that list. Their job is on the line. If we were bolder, if we grouped together and said, “Nah, it ain’t going down like that. You ain’t gonna do our culture like that,” then we could lock it down and make them follow the rules of how it’s supposed to be. But everybody’s more worried about their check and their job and all the benefits of getting into the concert free. Their whole mind state basically is, “I gotta suck a dick.” This is mainly aimed at the men. The women, you know, they suck whatever they gotta suck, but more so toward the men because they talk slicker on the radio, and their mouths are full of something they shouldn’t be chewing on.

Now, you talk about preserving the culture. I attended a recent show of yours in Brooklyn and the crowd was predominantly Anglo and Asian. It was a huge turnout and a successful show, but who owns hip hop now? If it’s about the need to preserve the culture, it seems that they are the population, or am I mistaken?

No doubt. The reason why they’re the population now because once something blows up out of our culture, white folks are always going to embrace something that’s fresh and new. We’re that intriguing as black people anyway. So when it comes to the shift in the crowd, it is a little weird to see less black people involved in it. But we have short attention spans to where once it’s out of our hands we either let it go or privately wish for things to be right again.

With me, one of the ways that you bring it back to being correct is that you gotta aim your music toward what’s missing. Ghetto people are missing. I welcome all races to come into our world and to enjoy the music—that
part isn’t even a problem. I don’t care if I’m the only black person in the room, that part is cool. In order for you to grab your own people back into it, you have to have stuff that they can relate to that makes them say, “You know what? I wanna get back into investing in this.” Most of the stuff is so really, really watered down, you can’t relate. I can’t relate to a lot of the garbage that’s out here now because it’s like, every day ain’t a party. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with escaping and keeping your mind off the stresses of the day, but the music came out of hard times. You still have to address the matters at hand. We still have a lot of issues that’s messed up with our people and someone’s gotta speak on it to make sure it gets corrected. The hustlers and gangbangers on the street are more hardheaded, so I aim my music at them so they can get right. They are the future. Most of our black males are getting killed off, so I know in order to hit them, I have to speak their language. In order for them to really enjoy the stuff, what I do is keep it as raw as possible. It’s gotta be so hard-core that they’re like, “Yo, This is what I’m spending my money on.” I’m trying to restore that and again, some artists should be preserving the history—they do it with rock and roll, they do it with jazz—hip hop’s the only one that says once you hit your thirties, you can’t rap no more because you’re too old. Why are we letting this happen? I had to be on a mission so that once other people do it, it will change things around.

You call some pop-rap “garbage” and “watered down.” What is real hip hop? Who determines the criteria?

Real hip hop is dedicated to those who know how to listen to it and for those who appreciate every aspect: the graffiti, the DJing, the break dancing, and the fifth element, which is beatboxing. All those elements and the style that made it so good has to be appreciated. The guys appreciating it are my age from forty on down to late thirties, or the ones who got to see it develop from its early stages to where it is now. We’re the ones that I aim it to. I don’t care if it’s only ten people that really liked “real hip hop.” That’s cool because we can all get together, start a whole movement from scratch and turn it into something. But I’ve seen more than ten people appreciate the artists that I appreciate, without having to be influenced by just me. Just on their own judgment, they know that Brand Nubian is great, A Tribe Called Quest and even Gang Starr, Cold Crush and Run-DMC, I’m not really concerned with the people that don’t care about it. In order to build a foundation, you have to recruit small and then go big, so if we have to start from zero, then so be it. I never tried to push this culture on people who don’t really care for it. Even if they listen to the stuff on the radio, being that it’s getting less and less pure, that’s why the sales are declining. People take it for granted that there aren’t a lot of real people out there. There aren’t a lot of real people left, so the percentage that exist, we don’t want the stuff that we’re hearing now. We want something else.
So you don’t want the “tinkerbell” sound?
   Never. It doesn’t go with our format. You know, create another type of music.

In another interview, you’ve said that just because someone’s rapping over it doesn’t make it hip hop.
   Exactly.

Okay. So the fact that someone contemporary, say Nelly Furtado, has teamed up with Timbaland. That’s considered hip hop.
   That’s a good pop record.

What about Justin Timberlake and Pharrell?
   Good pop record.

What about the boundaries determining what’s hip hop and what’s not? Does it box hip hop in and give it a limited definition?
   In order to love hip hop, no matter where you come from, I don’t care what generation, you have to have an appreciation for the people that opened the door for you. No one cares about the Rakims and the Big Daddy Kanes of the world, and they are so vital to the culture. If we don’t include them as being appreciated, it’s not gonna live long. Now that the money has been a bigger issue of keeping it going, no one cares about the history. If it doesn’t generate money, no one’s really concerned. Me, I’m always concerned because without the stuff that existed before, we wouldn’t have what goes on now.

History and context are important for you. Is that what keeps you inspired to keep making music? Are you out to save hip hop from itself?
   Without a doubt. I’m going to keep preserving, keep it going. I love what it did for my family, for my friends. I was able to get houses. It kept my boys off the block, outta jail. Keeping it raw kept them outta jail, so they can do what they do. Get money and feed their families. I know for fact, from experience, that this is what I’m going to continue to do in that aspect of keeping it true to the art form. So there’s no other way I can do it but that way.

It sounds like you have a serious love-affair with hip hop.
   Definitely.

This love affair that you have, it doesn’t sound like it’s going to be over anytime soon. Retirement’s not on the horizon?
   Not at all. I’m gonna do this forever. When I see all these artists like Prince, U2, and they’re still touring. Shit, the same thing applies to hip hop. You just have to respect it and have knowledge of it. All that has to go into the mix in
order for it to be authentic. That’s why to this day, if Whodini never makes another record, their history is better than most of the artists who sold 10 million. They’re the Rolling Stones, the Led Zeppelin of our culture.

Are there any past or present producers who you feel don’t get enough recognition?

Rick Rubin.

Should these people have icon status? What producers do you feel deserve mention?

Definitely Marley Marl, definitely Rick Rubin, definitely Larry Smith, who worked with Orange Crush, Run-DMC, Whodini, and Kurtis Blow albums. Howie Tee . . . these are people in the early stages, so you gotta give it up for them. They were doing it. Large Professor did a lot of work on the Rakim album but he didn’t get his credit. Of course Dr. Dre is a hall of famer. Of course me, Pete Rock. Alchemist hasn’t reached it yet. He and Havoc are great, great, great producers. I wouldn’t put them in hall of fame status yet. I’m a big fan of theirs. When it comes to hall of famers, I gotta give it up to the old timers because they were doing it when it was still new and fresh and hard-core. With no money and hard-core. The money came and everybody got lazy and softened and sweetened up the music. It’s like putting cream in the coffee. I don’t drink coffee like that but when I do, always, me and my father, we always drink it black.

Are there any producers on the upswing? In the past, you’ve mentioned Kanye West, Havoc of Mobb Deep, Nottz, Marley Marl, Alchemist . . .

Definitely Kanye, for bringing back sampling. I like Just Blaze, he’s really dope. He’s really good with the sampling. He’s very unique and knows how to pick a sample and put it into a jillion pieces and make it just bananas. So I gotta put him in the rankings. I like 9th Wonder, Nottz from the Teamstaz . . .

Of course, J. Dilla.

J. Dilla, man. Shit, I can’t even explain how great he was. He’s a chop master. Also Showbiz from Showbiz and AG. He’s another great, great, great producer. He made “Sound of the Police” with KRS-One. He did “Party Groove.” You know, people like that.

I notice of all the people you named, you didn’t mention any women because there are none. Missy Elliott kind of qualifies as hip hop because she raps. Based on your criteria I’m not sure if . . .

She’s hip hop.

Okay. So then Missy is the only female hip hop producer right now. There are no other women at the boards now, are there?
Cocoa Shanelle is on the come-up with doing production. She’s starting to do it more now. But Missy has more experience. I gotta definitely give Missy hers because there’s no women producers that are on a big scale.

Well hip hop’s always been a man’s world, so I guess our time is coming. Oh for sure. I’d never turn my back on it. I don’t discriminate. It’s an open-door policy. Let ’em in.
Word Up: An Interview with DJ Scratch

Shamika Ann Mitchell

Not all DJs and producers can say they were discovered by the hip hop music industry moguls Russell Simmons and Lyor Cohen, but for DJ Scratch, it was just one part of a story that is twenty-three years in the making. Born George Spivey, the thirty-eight-year-old Brooklyn native has experienced more in his career than most in the hip hop industry can dream of. Not only is he a renowned battle DJ, but he is an equally successful producer. The walls in his recording studio are so heavily laden with gold and platinum plaques that scores of others remain without a nail or proper hanging or are simply hidden from public view. His resume includes being the DJ for legendary rap duo EPMD, touring in 1988 with Run-DMC during the pinnacle of their career, being the tour DJ for Jay-Z, and having a rare opportunity for an extended set at each show. Scratch is also a resident DJ for a popular New York City nightclub and has a hit single, “New York Shit,” with rapper Busta Rhymes. While talking about his career and his perspective on the hip hop industry, Scratch’s realness as an artist becomes evident. As an advocate for innovation and originality, Scratch has no love for biters, the sucker DJs who strive for success on the backs of others’ efforts. His style is authentic; often imitated but never duplicated, Scratch is in a league of his own. The following is a sampling of what makes him an iconic figure who has inspired countless others to get behind the turntables and mix things up.

Congrats on your current hit track, “New York Shit” with Busta Rhymes and Swizz Beatz. Other than being hip hop’s birthplace, what makes New York City rap special?
What makes it special is the wordplay. New York always tries to find the slickest way to say anything. For example, a rapper from a different region, say the South or the Midwest, they’re very simple with the wordplay. You know, New York is always slangy. We slick talk. We’re city slickers. So, for example, a rapper from the West Coast might say, “My pockets stay fat.” It’s some slang, but New York always gotta say it the flyest. So instead of saying that, we might say, “My pockets stay nine months.”

That’s also Brooklyn though. That’s very Brooklyn.

That’s definitely Brooklyn. I’m a Brooklyn dude. But you know, New Yorkers are the slang cats.

Do you think that because New York is cosmopolitan, the lyrics should be more complicated?

It’s just the way it always is. It’s just common talk. We talk different from anyone else in the world. Once you go through any tunnel, or any bridge that leaves out of New York [City], the accent has a southern twang, even from Jersey on down.

Speaking of New York rap, I’ve read that Grandmaster Flash was your hero. Who is your hero right now? Who is your inspiration?

I am. I don’t have anyone to look up to right now. I’m my inspiration now because, back when I used to look up to Flash, when I first met Flash, I told Flash that he was the reason I became a DJ. Through the years of being with EPMD and ten years after that, DJs come to me and say the same thing I said to Flash, and I never really paid attention to it. A few years ago I was like wow, I’m these kids’ Grandmaster Flash, like how Flash was to me. So I’m my own inspiration. Now I inspire myself to still be in the game this long, because people don’t be in the game this long and be consistent. Somebody might’ve had a record ten years ago, disappear and then resurface, but it’s only three people, well really two, who have been consistent from day one until now: me and LL Cool J. We’ve been consistent and current and relevant to the game nonstop from then to now.

When did you start? When would you say your starting year was? When was “then”?

Man, my “then” was like three years after LL maybe, ’87, ’88. LL was ’85. That’s a long time.

Even before ’88 I was touring in ’85 and ’86. . . . I’d been around the country.

But not with . . .

Nah. Not with any groups. I went around the world before I even got with a group. . . . I traveled the world with Run-DMC. Before I got with EPMD,
I had traveled the world. My first major, major tour was overseas, so when I toured in the United States, it was nothing. I was roughing it overseas, taking showers at the venue and all that, so when I got here, the tour buses are different, there’s bunks—it’s like mini-mansions on wheels.

So by ’88, ’89, you were already seasoned. You had already earned your stripes.

I was seasoned, yeah.

Let’s talk about EPMD. Now, Erick and Parrish did a lot of producing, but you produced for them as well. You didn’t start seriously getting behind the boards until they split in 1992. Why the transition?

Because I had time to, actually. With EPMD, we were on tour like four, five months out of the year. Every year I was down with them. . . . So to be on tour for two months here, then go home for a week, then go on another tour—that’s back when the touring business was really crazy, and good with hip hop—there would be tours all the time. Every season there was a tour and EPMD was on every one of them. So I didn’t have time to do anything else. When I come home, I just want to be in my bed, be with my family . . . home-cooked food. That’s it. I didn’t think about beats or anything else. After the break I had time.

You said you weren’t thinking about any beats. How did you learn to put beats together?

I’m just self-taught really. I was making beats before I had a beat machine or anything like that. It’s this thing old-heads know. It’s called pause-looping. The first beats I was making was pause-looping.

So you learned through trial and error?

Yes. Everything in this game you learn from trial and error. There’s no school of hip hop. Well, now there’s schools to learn how to DJ, but back then everything was trial and error. There’s still no school to learn the business of it.

And the analog? Why do you prefer analog over digital?

Analog because of the sound. Digital is great too. I use digital, but digital is like a computer and computers crash. You might work all day and the computer just crashes. You don’t have that problem with analog.

What about the quality of the sound?

The quality of analog is better. With hip hop, analog is the better sound. When you go digital, it strips down elements. Like, when you’re going with a bass line, it strips it down. Analog is as pure as you record it.
What’s the sound for you? I know it’s heavy bass.


Do you consider yourself a hip hop producer or a music producer?

I’m a music producer.

What about sampling? Is that crucial for you? Do you have a particular formula?

My formula really is that I start with the drums. If I’m making a track, if it’s R&B, or hip hop or whatever, my formula is the drums. Everything goes around the drums.

In a prior interview, you said that you still dig in the crates. In literature, Ahab had Moby Dick and Jason had the golden fleece. In hip hop, Bambaataaa was looking for the perfect beat. What’s your elusive record? Do you have one?

I just found my elusive record like two months ago. “I Can’t Stop,” the album version, it’s a breakbeat. The John Davis Orchestra. The album version. I just found it. Two copies, fresh!

How does one even get an elusive record? Do you hear something and say, “I must have that”?

Yeah. It may be something you heard someone else play or you might’ve heard it on a movie or on a commercial. If I want it, I’m going to do everything to get it.

I’ve heard people say that the producer and DJ get no love compared to the front men. Fresh Prince got more love than Jeff; Rakim got more love than Eric B. Why is it harder for a hip hop producer or DJ to get recognition?

You just said it. Because they’re the front men. The person with the mic is the one that’s gonna get heard. If there’s two people seen, the one that’s getting heard is going to get the most recognition. We’re behind the scenes. Like watching the TV show Three’s Company—people know the stars but nobody’s gonna know the producer for the show, the behind-the-scenes person. Even though he’s getting more money than everybody, he’s not making appearances on the show.

Is it a thankless job to be behind the scenes? Unless you want the shine . . .

If you want the shine like that, you’ll be the person on the mic, the person in the video, talking and performing. You usually never hear the DJ speaking unless you’re at a concert, but you always hear the rapper speak.
Even though the DJ could’ve put the whole song together. So people love the song but don’t necessarily love you.
    Right. Some people want the shine.

Like Kanye.
    Right. He wants the shine. But people who usually strive for that shine get in trouble for some reason. As long as my paperwork is correct, that’s all I care about. I’d rather be behind the scenes. I have to show my face now, but if I shine now it’s because of what I’m doing, not because I’m reaching.

You mentioned that most pay more attention to your DJ accomplishments than to your success as a producer. Flash inspired you to DJ, but who are some producers that inspired you?
    Marley Marl, Premier, Pete Rock, Easy Mo Bee, King of Chill—another slept-on producer who was part of the group Brooklyn Alliance—Large Professor, J. Dilla, the Beatminerz. Those are my inspirations.

All hard-core hip hop for the most part.
    Yeah. That’s all it was. I respect and acknowledge the hands-on cats.

Earlier you said that you consider yourself a music producer as opposed to a hip hop producer. Why the distinction?
    Well, people just put tags on everything. I say I’m a producer period. I can do different types of music. You have to show your versatility. I do that in every field. The same thing I approach with my DJing, I try to approach with my producing. With my DJing, I feel that every DJ should know how to scratch with both hands and most DJs don’t. They can scratch really good with one hand and the other is just okay. If you’re a DJ, you need to know how to do all sectors of DJing. If you’re a battle DJ, you need to learn how to DJ in the club; you need to learn how to DJ in a concert. With producing, if you started out with hip hop, you need to branch out because it broadens your talents. If you’re just a hip hop producer and, say, Celine Dion wants to hire you for a track, you gotta be able to know how to do that shit. Of course she’s hiring you for the work that you do, but you still have to be familiar and broaden your shit out. You can still have some grit, but [have] some Celine Dion shit too.

What about radio DJs? Is that another component of DJing or is that something separate?
    I don’t really consider radio DJing as a different sector. Mix show DJs are just playing songs—you’re not really pleasing the audience. You can play them any order you want but they’re still gonna listen.
Even if there’s scratching and cutting?
Yeah. It doesn’t really require any certain skill when you DJ on the radio. You’re not playing for an audience right in front of you where you have to please them and make them dance.

Because they’ll leave or go to the bar.
Right. When you’re DJing on the radio, you’re relaxing. DJing on the radio is like you’re on vacation. But when you’re DJing for the actual consumer and they’re right in front of you and you have to please them, or you’re at the concert and you’ve gotta please 20,000 people or you’re in a club and you’ve gotta please 1,000 people, that’s when you’re in the field, you’re working.

Part of your career was that project the School of Turntable Arts. What’s that about?
DJ tutoring. It’s not like the Scratch Academy where you have a bunch of different DJs teaching people. These people are learning straight from me, not from my students, an apprentice, or colleagues. They’re learning directly from me, the way I taught myself how to DJ.

Is it still running?
Yes. I think it’s better. I think it’s cool for business how the Scratch Academy runs because it makes a lot of money. I’m just doing it on the love of it. I know that shit sounds corny, but if I wanted to learn how to DJ, I’d want to learn from my favorite DJ or one of my favorite DJs. That is the shit right there. When you’re taught something, you’re not usually taught from one of the people that created the shit you wanna learn . . .

Like taking basketball classes with Michael Jordan.
Exactly.

You mentioned the Scratch DJ Academy, which was cofounded by your late former mentor, Jam Master Jay. Also, the Berklee College of Music has a turntable technique course that has the longest waiting list on its campus. One can even take a class on break dancing and b-boying. What’s your opinion about hip hop’s official mainstream status and the interest it generates?
Everybody wants to do this hip hop. I just say, “See? I told y’all,” because not too long ago corporate America wasn’t messing with hip hop. Period. R&B wasn’t even messing with hip hop. R&B was disrespecting hip hop, now R&B can’t survive without hip hop. R&B hits have a hip hop beat with some strings on it and most of the time a rapper’s featured on it. It’s the only way it survives now. R&B is totally different, it’s hip hopped out, it’s diluted with hip hop. Corporate America, everything they market is hip hop, whether it’s from break dancing or some type of DJ on a Burger King commercial. Even the Flintstones are dressed like Run-DMC. Everything is marketed around hip
hop because they know this music is the biggest-selling music. It went past country, it went way past rock music, and this is the way that you reach the youth. For corporate America, it’s about money.

After winning the New Music Seminar Battle for World Supremacy DJ Championship in 1988, you had the privilege of having Jam Master Jay as a mentor.

While on tour, we became cool and he would just give me advice about being a concert DJ. I was a raw battle DJ. I would show him tricks and routines and he basically converted me from a battle DJ to a concert showman. He gave me advice all the time on tour, like what to do. I would just watch them, watch what he’d do. So when I got down with EPMD, I became Jam Master Jay because they weren’t using vinyl. They used a half-inch reel—this was before DAT machines—I’m like, “Nah. Y’all gotta get rid of this tape machine. Y’all gotta get all the vinyl and whatever y’all don’t have, you gotta get pressed up. We gotta do this shit like Run-DMC.” That’s what it was.

Who do you mentor?

I mentored a lot of DJs. We had a DJ camp and were just running a boot camp for DJs. Me and DJ Clark Kent. We would just snatch DJs from off the street, train them, and turn them into legends. We made legends. We created legends. We created legends, like DJ Plastic Man, DJ Richie Rich. These were DJs we taught from the streets, brought them into Clark’s basement and just showed them different routines. Now they’re legends. We created legends. So those two. I was Spinderella’s mentor, Cocoa Shanelle, DJ Mocha, DJ June currently. I was a mentor to a lot of cats. I’ve been in the game a long time so people always wanna pick my brain.

You began DJing when you were a boy of eight. Thirty years later, you’re still making music. What’s your motivation?

The longevity and just seeing the changes from day one to now. It’s crazy. And businesswise, when people come into this hip hop music business, you don’t come as a businessman. You learn how to become a businessman through trial and error.

Well, it wasn’t much of a business when you started.

Yeah. It was a business, but we didn’t know anything about it. Melle Mel, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the groups that made the first rap records, like Kurtis Blow . . .

I’m talking about before then, when people just made tapes of house parties, copied and sold them.

Yeah. It wasn’t much of a business then.
Now Sugar Hill Records . . .
Right. That’s what I’m talking about. The people who were recording on Sugar Hill Records and Enjoy! Records, they didn’t get a dime. They didn’t get the publishing. Artists right now still don’t know their business. There’s artists right now that don’t get royalties. Don’t get publishing. Don’t know anything about it. So coming into this game, you have to learn the business. No one comes into this as a businessman—everybody that comes into this business gets jerked until you learn the business. If you don’t learn the business, you’re gonna be broke, basically.

So is the business aspect another part of your inspiration? Trying to help people to understand?
Yes, definitely. I hate to see people get taken advantage of.

If there were a DJ Scratch recipe, it’d be: one quarter battle DJ, one quarter concert DJ, one quarter producer, and one quarter party/club DJ. Is there one component you enjoy the most?
Concert DJ, because it’s crazy when one person, not even a rapper, can make 20,000 people—male and female—scream from something he’s doing with his hands and not with his mouth.

Since we’re talking about hands, Grandwizard Theodore invented the scratch thirty years ago. Since then, a lot has developed in turntable arts. What are your contributions to the history of the craft?
My contributions are the best scratches ever recorded in the history of hip hop, recorded on songs like “So Whatcha Sayin’,” “Rampage,” “Funky Piano.” The best scratches on record. Groundbreaking, like when I did the scratching on “So Whatcha Sayin’,” no DJ was doing scratches like that on record. When I did that, it changed the whole game. Some of the illest, the best DJ tricks of all time, like “Friday the 13th I’m a Play Jason” . . .

Did you ever do the handcuffs live?
Yeah, but that wasn’t something that would make somebody never forget that forever. There’s patented tricks that the whole world knows me for. Like the pulling my pants down routine, the “Your Pants Are Sagging” from “The Scenario.” I have a video clip of it on my MySpace page. Um, taking off my shirt while I’m scratching at the same time, that trick. Picking up the turntable. Cutting with my private parts, that trick. A lot of body tricks that I came up with. A lot of my routines . . . I’ve got so many routines that I’m known for. So my contributions are those routines that I just mentioned. I was doing innovative scratches, innovative routines.

Let’s talk about the turntablism lexicon. We’ve already mentioned the scratch. There’s also backspinning, cutting, the scribble, the blend, the uzi, and there’s mixing. Has anyone been credited for those?
Backspinning is basically called clockwork. If the break is at twelve o’clock, and the record starts playing, you backspin it to twelve o’clock. I think Flash is the person who did that first. Everything else I don’t know, but a lot of DJs do be putting their names on things they didn’t create, which is a circus right now. There’s a name for every little scratch and everything, which is crazy because if that was the case I would own a lot of it. . . . Everything else is just the basic fundamentals of DJing.

Other than you, the X-ecutioners, Q-Bert, and a few others, turntablists aren’t given much popular exposure. In the past, you’ve mentioned Howie Tee, Mixmaster Ice, Barry B, and Grandmaster DXT, and you also mentioned Cutmaster DC earlier, as some of turntablism’s unsung heroes. Are there other artists—past or present—that you feel deserve mention?

DJ Cash Money is one of the greatest DJs of all time. Everybody knows that but he doesn’t get the shine that he deserves. DJ Cheese from Jersey. Grandmaster Dee from Whodini . . . damn . . . there’s so many . . .

Well, the sung heroes we know about. But turntablism as a subculture makes it harder for artists to make the transition into a broader audience. What about LL Cool J’s DJ?

Nah. He was never really a DJ like that.

Well, it was that one song, “Jack the Ripper” . . .

That wasn’t him doing the scratches. That was DJ Bobcat, another unsung hero.

What?!

No disrespect, but everybody knows that. Cut Creator was never a DJ like that. He just spun the records. He couldn’t scratch. Bobcat was the one doing it. Like the song “Go Cut Creator Go,” that was Bobcat, because Cut Creator couldn’t scratch like that. No disrespect, but the DJ world knows that. Cut Creator, he had the flyest name. . . . Um, DJ Joe Cooley from LA, DJ M.Walk who was Tone Loc’s DJ, he’s another dope DJ.

Of the battle DJs out right now, are there any who have potential icon status?

No. There are currently no DJs who inspire me. Now DJs are doing—everybody’s doing the same thing. Nobody’s doing anything original, so it’s at a standstill. Everybody’s just doing what they see on the DVDs. This term turntablist is like the term rap. I think Babu created that. It’s all DJing to me, whether you’re a battle DJ, a concert DJ, a club DJ, or a radio DJ. Battle DJs are turntablists. Nobody has stuck out to me. They’re all good, but nobody’s stuck out and has done something I haven’t seen before. Just something different. I wanna see who’s gonna take this shit to the next level.
With two turntables, two vinyl discs, and a cross-fader, how much more inventive could someone get?

The sky’s the limit. Back when you was just backspinning and catching the record, which was considered turtle slow, back then, you was fast as lightning. Then the era with Flash and Theodore, they would catch a record every four bars, then DJs like me and DJ Cash Money and Mixmaster Ice, were catching every one second. So in Flash and them’s era, they were fast as lightning, until we showed that we can be faster. Then, that whole eighties where the whole record doesn’t play because we’re going so fast. It’s like, now, with the new kids, beat juggling got popular. Beat juggling’s when you take two records and make a different beat out of it. We did that in the early eighties, we just never put a name on it. One person claimed that they created it and everybody ran with that. It’s cool but that stuff had been a long time ago. In the eighties, we never put a name on anything. We never named scratches, we just did it. Anyway, the beat juggling thing got popular and that’s all that’s been going on since ’94. Twelve years and it’s still the same thing. Who’s gonna take it to the next level from beat juggling?

Since we’re talking about the craft of DJing, please share some details about your documentary project, So Whatcha Sayin’. Is it all about you?

Yes. Exactly. It’s celebrating over twenty years in the game. Everybody knows my name, but everybody doesn’t know my face. People rarely hear me speaking. You’re gonna see things you’ve never seen before. There’s rare footage from back during that EPMD reign. It features everybody I’ve worked with, artists that I produced for, artists that I DJed for.

When’s your anniversary?

I don’t have a particular date.

How long do you think it’s been?

Definitely over twenty . . . about twenty-three [years]. I’m basically doing it because I’ve been in a lot of books about hip hop, a lot of DVDs and videos and all that. They ask questions but you can’t tell my story in five minutes. You can’t tell it in one paragraph. There’s a whole lot and like I said before, there’s only two people who’ve been in the industry this long and consistently, me and LL Cool J. So if someone wants to know about my story, it’s gonna take a while to tell it, and I’d rather tell it than have somebody else tell my story.

And tell it honestly, right? You’re not going to paint this picture of yourself . . .

I’m talking about good and bad. It’s gonna be about me of course, but there’s gonna be lessons in there also, and advice, and also paying homage to DJs that never get mentioned in these documentaries. A lot of these DJs, they’re doing these DVDs and they don’t even have common knowledge about certain DJs that put in the work in this game. A lot of people don’t
know where this comes from. When you ask them, “Do you know about the beginning of this shit? Do you know hip hop?” They say, “Yeah, I know Kool Herc. Kool Herc started it.” Then they skip past the whole eighties, which was the most exciting era, the best in hip hop.


Yeah. It’s crazy. Cutmaster DC, I mean c’mon. He was cutting with basketballs and ten-speed bikes and shit. Like DJs don’t know anything about that. They go from Herc, Flash, skip past everybody else, then go to the X-ecutioners, Q-Bert, to DJs of today. They skip past the whole eighties.

So you’re trying to fill that gap?

I’m just doing my part. Cats get on camera and they tend to forget, or they don’t wanna give up props. So I’m just doing my part.

What is in the future for you, other than So Whatcha Sayin’?

Just basically maintain. If something comes and it looks good, I’ll try it. I’m seventeen years past the artist’s life span in hip hop. Usually it’s three years and you’re out . . . three albums and you’re done. . . . DJing is first. I’m a producer on the side. I didn’t know that I would be as successful as a producer as I was as a DJ. I was doing the producer thing because I like to do it, but I never thought that I would have this much impact as a producer.

You call yourself “your favorite DJ’s favorite DJ.” Who is your favorite DJ?

My favorite DJ is Grandmaster Flash. I’ll play you something from 1981 and you can’t believe he was catching the record like that. It was crazy. Him and Theodore. And DJ Master Don. The one who made me wanna become a DJ when I heard him was solely Grandmaster Flash, but there were other DJs as nice as Flash and they were all my favorite DJs. It was Grandmaster Flash, Grandwizard Theodore, DJ Master Don, and DJ Whiz Kid. All from that era, the late seventies, early eighties.

Let’s go back to the biters. Are you as possessive as Bambaataa was, taking the labels off your records?

Back then, I didn’t let people videotape me because biting wasn’t allowed. As far as DJing, back then, a DJ would sit there and videotape you, then go home and study your tricks, then go do a show and try to claim it. Back then, biting was enforced. Now, it’s okay to copy somebody’s whole routine. . . . It’s disgusting right now. There’s no loyalty, there’s no originality. Everybody’s doing what they’ve seen someone else do instead of creating on their own, which leaves certain parts of DJing at a standstill. Everybody’s biting and no one’s creating . . .

Taking labels off, that’s what you did. I don’t do that now. Everything was so exclusive back then, when you play a break and the other DJs are like,
“Oh shit. What’s that?” And they’re trying to look at the label, write it down, go to their party and are like, “I got the new hot shit that I discovered.” For the sucker DJs, you would cover it up, or put the records in the tub to get the label lifted off. There’s a guy who comes to the club I spin at now, who types my entire playlist into his Blackberry. He goes to his club and plays the same records—sloppy—but it’s still my routine.

Well, that’s like playing cards. The saying goes, “You can look in my hand . . .”

But you can’t play them like me. Sucker DJs, they still exist.

Is that also part of your inspiration?

Yeah. Switch it up a little. You can play the same records, but you can’t play them like me.
Those of us who consider ourselves to be true hip hop fans have at some point engaged in a spirited discussion with our friends about who might be the best rapper. The discussion inevitably escalates to a heated argument as we each try to make our point on why a certain artist deserves or doesn’t deserve to be mentioned. Inevitably, there are some names that almost never get mentioned in these debates. For whatever reason, these artists get overlooked by the masses of hip hop fans despite their overwhelming talents and ability.

I have been asked to compile a list of the most overlooked MCs in the game, the cats that rarely get mentioned in discussions of who is the best. It seems appropriate that I was chosen to write this piece since in many people’s minds, and my own I suppose, I myself fit into this category. It also is fitting that this section was chosen to be the afterword of this book since these MCs have gone through their careers being an afterthought in the minds of most hip hop fans.

Here are, in my opinion, twenty-four of the most overlooked MCs in hip hop history. The list is based on lyrical talent and not song making or record sales. The talent of these MCs is undeniable, but their lyrical significance has been overlooked.

1. CHILL ROB G

Chill Rob was killin’em with his lyrics in the early nineties with songs like “Court Is in Session” and “Let Me Show You” from his album produced by Mark the 45 King.
2. **G DEP**
   Some may be surprised to see Dep on this list, but he’s been consistently putting words together in unique ways since his appearance on Gang Starr’s “At the Mall” from their *Moment of Truth* album.

3. **GRAND PUBA**
   You cannot forget the impact that Puba had on the game with his colorful flow and one-of-a-kind style of bragging.

4. **CHUBB ROCK**
   Most people write this guy off because of minimal record sales, but in terms of lyrics, Chubb really had a knack for connecting the dots and making words sound incredible.

5. **COMMON**
   Com is not in most people’s top twenty, but his lyrics speak for themselves. He has done it at the highest level lyrically and still remained true to his conscious message.

6. **PHONTE (FROM LITTLE BROTHER)**
   Someone from the “now school” and reppin’ Little Brother to the fullest, Phonte has really been raising eyebrows with his standout performances featured on several albums and LB mixtapes. His consistency gets him on this list easily.

7. **LAURYN HILL**
   I am sure I’m not the only one who wishes L Boogie never discovered she could sing. Her lyrical prowess as a straight-up MC is missed by the many mainstream fans who bought her album.

8. **GZA**
   How can you front on this Wu-Tang general who has been crushing us with the rhymes since his anchor leg on “Protect Ya Neck”?

9. **JUICE**
   This cat has never released a commercially recognized album but yet deserves to be on this list for his ability to do it on the highest level with writtens and off the dome, which are both equally incredible.

10. **LUDACRIS**
    I know you’re thinking, “What is this guy doing on here?” With his overwhelming commercial success and his proven ability to make hits, Luda’s talent as a lyricist gets lost in all the hype. Straight up, this guy is nice.
11. BLACK THOUGHT
Supertalented as an MC, Thought’s lyrical ability sometimes gets overshadowed and often drowned out by the great Roots movement.

12. ROYCE DA 5'9"
Most don’t mention Royce anywhere in their top twenty, but I have the freestyles of him and Eminem trading verses on several occasions. If it weren’t Em on the other side of those exchanges, this guy would’ve made history already.

13. TALIB KWELI
Kweli has established himself as one of the most skilled from his early Black Star days to the present.

14. MOS DEF
For the casual fan, Mos Def’s talent as an actor has overshadowed the fact that on the microphone he is incredibly talented.

15. ELZHI (FROM SLUM VILLAGE)
As in the case of Phonte, I hate to single out one member of a group because it’s the contribution of each member that truly makes musical chemistry. With that being said, Elzhi has consistently delivered incredible lyrical performances on the Slum Village projects, yet most don’t know his name.

16. CANIBUS
So many of us confuse song making with lyrical talent. Canibus is without a doubt one of the best MCs to ever spit a verse. His true talent can be heard on any number of fifty-plus bar freestyles floating around the Internet. His ability to put words together in unusual rhyme patterns is unparalleled.

17. LADY OF RAGE
Reppin’ for the ladies, the Lady of Rage is one of those rare talents who writes all her own material and has always been able to hold her own against the best, male or female.

18. LORD FINESSE
With his crowd-pleasing punch lines and his affiliation with the DITC crew, Finesse has been one of the best and most entertaining MCs in the game.

19. BUCKSHOT
This original member of the Boot Camp Clik led the way with incredible flow and intense wordplay, first on the Black Moon album *Enta Da Stage* and then with his contributions on all the BCC releases thereafter.
20. TREACH  
Somewhere in between all the success of Naughty by Nature and the long list of hit records that came with it, people forgot that Treach was pretty nice. Maybe we were too busy saying “hayaay, hooool” and “yeah, you know me” to recognize his talent, but he deserves to be on this list.

21. DAS EFX  
These guys deserve to be on this list as a collective duo because in my opinion neither of them out performed the other. Their perfect balance of talent makes them one of the best groups ever, and their EFX on every MC from New York to New Zealand is well diggity documented.

22. KING TEE  
I am not sure who his influences were, but it’s clear that King Tee is a student of hip hop. His skill has transcended time and from his early days until his performance on Dr. Dre’s *Chronic 2001*, Teela has been consistently nice on the mic.

23. KEITH MURRAY  
You will rarely hear Keith Murray’s name mentioned among the best. Some complain that they don’t know what he is talking about. I suppose Keith is an acquired taste, but I guess I am used to his flavor because he makes my list.

24. SAUKRATES  
Because he reps Toronto, Canada, there’s no wonder why this young talent gets overlooked. The fact is Saukrates is supertalented, and maybe by virtue of this list, more people in the United States will recognize his ability.

**HONORABLE MENTIONS**

Madlib  
Sean Price  
Xzibit  
Kurupt  
Grand Daddy IU  
Special Ed  
Bahamadia  
B Real (Cypress Hill)  
Scarface (Geto Boys)  
Andre 3000 (Outkast)  
CL Smooth
Kwame
Young Z
Tha Alkaholiks
Large Professor
The D.O.C.
Rah Digga
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JERU THE DAMAJA hails from Brooklyn, New York, where he was born and raised. Jeru was first introduced to hip hop in the local parks of his neighborhood at age seven, and started writing his own lyrics at age ten. Hip hop has been a part of his life for as long as he can remember. Jeru created and took on the persona of “The Damaja” (because he damages the mic) that is part conscious truth teller and part true to the streets’ Brooklyn hard rock. He first showcased his hardcore Brooklyn style to audiences on “I’m the Man,” a track from Gang Starr’s 1992 album *Daily Operation*. In 1993 he released his first single, “Come Clean,” which was produced by DJ Premier and became an instant underground hit. His first album, *The Sun Rises in the East*, released in 1994, and produced entirely by DJ Premier, is considered a classic, and was one of the most acclaimed hip hop albums of its time.

On wax or in the ride, MASTA ACE is a true hip-hop hall-of-famer and one of rap’s greatest lyricists. The rhyme veteran found a renewed energy for making music in 2000 after a brief spell of industry disenchantment. The rapper/producer re-entered the scene, dropping acclaimed singles on a variety of independent labels, and a successful European tour in October of that year.
inspired him to connect with Yosumi and record *Disposable Arts*, his fourth masterfully crafted collection of clever, streetwise wordplay and bangin’ beats.

Masta Ace was raised in the projects (“on the 7th floor”) of Brownsville, Brooklyn. He made his rap world debut in 1988 on the classic posse cut “The Symphony,” from legendary producer Marley Marl’s *In Control . . . Vol. 1* compilation, alongside Big Daddy Kane, Kool G Rap and Craig G. *In Control* also featured two Ace solo cuts, and a subsequent recording contract with Cold Chillin’ Records led to his 1990 debut album, *Take A Look Around*, featuring hip-hop classics like “Music Man,” “Letter to the Better,” and “Me And The Biz.” After Cold Chillin’ failed to make Ace a priority, he bounced to LA-based label Delicious Vinyl, where he teamed up with the Brand New Heavies for a track on their *Heavy Rhyme Experience*, and dropped his own second album, 1993’s *Slaughtahouse*. Grimy rhymes about stick-up kids, spraycan artists and wack emcees made *Slaughtahouse* an underground favorite, but it was “Born To Roll,” a ride-ready remix of “Jeep Ass Niguh,” that made the album a national success.

A custom car fanatic himself, Ace found a new audience in the world of shiny rims and boomin’ sound systems, which drove him to create his third album, 1995’s *Sittin’ On Chrome*. Meanwhile, Ace kept his hardcore hip hop heads satisfied with joints like the 1994 title track from Spike Lee’s *Crooklyn* soundtrack, rhyming over a Tribe Called Quest production with Special Ed and Buckshot as The Crooklyn Dodgers, along with elusive basement-bangers like “Top Ten List.”

SHAWN BERNARDO was born and raised on the bassy, rubber-burned streets of Oakland, California, where he has been a lifelong participant in hip hop culture and an avid devotee of the urban vernacular arts. An art historian and a classicist by training—degrees from UC Berkeley and University of London flank his kitsch poster of T La Rock—he is a corporate liaison by profession who has spent the bulk of his professional career collecting breakbeats and vintage tracksuits. Labeled a retro-purist (and a “hip hop snob”), he daily laments the passing of the golden era and frequently finds time to put fingers to keyboard as a freelance writer on all things subculturally old school, elevating underground hip hop and all of its former manifestations into the canons of high culture and greater academia.

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