

Observations of the Hip Hop Music Culture

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A Capstone Project prepared in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

May 2009

Approved by: _____
Capstone Adviser Date

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Introduction/The Music: Content & Appeal

*“Lost generation, faced paced nation
World population confront they frustration,
The principles of true hip-hop have been forsaken
It’s all contractual and about money making, Pretend-to-be-cats don’t seem to know
they limitations, Exact replication and false representation..”*

-The Roots single “What They Do” off of the 1996 LP *Illadelph HalfLife*-

I have a slight feeling, although I can’t confirm that most people see Hip-Hop music through the scopes of the BET’s and MTV’s, and other large and small medium networks as a culture embodied, solely with braggadocious lyrics and materialistic and at often violent lifestyles. For the purpose of this paper if this is so, I would recommend to all that share that sentiment to take a careful look at some additional factors that they may be unaware of, both positive and negative that have at one point or another influenced the music’s eventual lucrative structure, catapulting it to an ever growing international audience, and legitimizing it as an official artistic form. The topics to be discussed might help shed light on not only the genre of hip-hop and how it’s interpreted, but most importantly society.

As both an enthusiast and critic of the music, I’ve had the pleasure to observe and feel the impact of this multi-faceted yet complex organism that constantly changes amidst a powerful commercial grip and occasional controversy and scrutiny. I’ve spent an enormous amount of time listening, dissecting, and watching the transitions take place. I can vividly remember as a young child growing up in the city of Camden New Jersey and listening to some of the songs that my older brothers and neighbors would listen to. I

would at times stand in the mirror and emulate these young men hoping to be the next big star that would be on the radio or television. There exist some of the fondest memories of recess in the schoolyard where the kids would ignorantly argue about who were the best, coolest, and most stylish emcees. It was obvious that we really didn't know what we were talking about but we knew that we loved the music and how it sounded. It was also obvious that most people throughout the city loved it, as you could constantly hear songs being played through portable stereos and automobiles that would pass by. Those songs that I remember from back then, that I hear every so often take me back to my era of the good old days. The reason I refer to them as the good old days is that the music would be a powerful force in the fact that it brought everyone together for a moment in time. Rap groups of the 1980's and 1990's like Run-D.M.C., Boogie Down Productions, and Public Enemy would be just a mere beginning and piece of the soundtrack to my life. It would not be until several years later that I would really start to understand the music's content and would become somewhat critical and selective of what I purchased. It would also be several years later that I would observe just how beautiful and strong the power of words were and the effect that they can have on people.

Those who have at-least observed the culture at some point in time will vouch for it's impact and that it's presence has been felt among several facets of society in such areas as sports, fashion, and education. The artists who have influenced the culture have provided it's listeners with some of the most surreal and horrific stories of those who reside in inner cities and come from impoverished conditions. They reveal in different ways the celebrations and low points of life and reflect on the importance of the will to survive amid many complex obstacles. Some of these men and women can at times

reveal and fulfill the longstanding contradictions, stereotypes, and double standards that exist in our ideologies. They are among some of the great wordsmiths who create catchy and infectious anthems in which they sometime inform, celebrate, and from time to time belittle one another for the sake of the tradition of hip-hop. For me, it's breathtaking to hear a lyricist paint pictures with words over original and recreated rhythms in such a fluid fashion articulating a multitude of thoughts. While both enacting and/or exposing the ills that exist within their own community and in even larger society, the music has proven beyond a doubt to be both a mobilizer and a divider.

The negativity that has over the years been assigned to Hip Hop music is based on the primary arguments of whether it causes violence and is misogynistic. To some, the music is representative of an angry and disillusioned youth. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson of Georgetown University responds to the negative feedback that it has received by asserting that "mainstream blacks and whites persist in categorically negative appraisals of rap, refusing to distinguish between enabling productive rap messages and the social violence that exists in many poor communities" (Dyson 404). Over the last two decades, the music has garnered attention and negative feedback from those in political and religious circles, but steadily maintains a potent vigor as it constantly evolves and shifts into new arenas. Author Tricia Rose of the book "Black Noise" explains that "rap music is by no means the only form of expression under attack and that popular white forms of expression, especially heavy metal have been the target of increased sanctions and assaults by politically and economically powerful organizations that are represented by major corporations, national-level politicians, school associations, and local police and municipal officials." (Rose 129) Those who criticize and detest the music should look

further into the content and background and will begin to understand that it's much more than what it sounds like and appears to be.

To acknowledge some of the history and how the music came to be along with the factors that initially and currently motivate the music is to grasp the consciousness and depth. Though important, the successes of artists, CEO's, and record labels are of minimal significance compared to some of the historical ideologies and substances that saturate the music. As a brief refresher, the earliest definition of Hip-Hop was based on the idea of four different elements: Emceeing (Rapping), deejaying, break-dancing, and graffiti. Due to the improper use over the years, the term Hip-Hop, as a collective unit, has become synonymous with namely rapping which is the rhythmic storytelling artistic form. All elements are interconnected as most can see through the music and dance sides, but as time would pass, the lyrics of the "Masters of Ceremonies" or emcees would take the lead role of navigating the culture's course. It is currently recognized by many as the most popular form of black popular culture expression and music to date sharing kinship with the blues, jazz, and reggae. The music has participants of several ethnic groups throughout the world; (African & European Americans, Latinos, West Indian, & Asian) to name a few. Some of the music's roots can be directly traced to several artistic and social-political movements dating back to the 1960's and 1970's like the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. Protests, elections, and even events like the more recent "Million Man March" of 1995 represent just a few of Hip Hop's involvements in Afro-American humanitarian efforts.

There are even parallels in the relationship with the Afro-American religious experience in Hip Hop as it was with the blues and jazz. Moreover, as Dr. Dyson

explains, “the [hip-hop] artists appeal to the rhetorical practices honed in from Afro-American religious experiences and the cultural potency of black singing and musical traditions to produce and engaging hybrid” (Dyson 408). The lyrics that the artists create rely heavily on rhyme, alliteration, assonance and other poetic styles and forms. With a strong emphasis on individualism, the artists provide their own perspectives and expressions within the genre. There is also identification with the culture of hip-hop music and it’s relationship with black people. To explain further, Author Imani Perry of the book “Prophets of the Hood” describes hip-hop music “as existing primarily within a black framework and is based on four characteristics which are: 1) the primary language is African American Vernacular; 2) has political location in society distinctly ascribed to black people, music, and cultural forms; 3) derived from black American oral culture; and 4) is derived from black American musical traditions” (Perry 10).

To delve a little bit further into how the religious experience and oration was involved, one can take a look at the various music and religious orations from the period of slavery on up. The very effects of chattel slavery and it’s aftershocks played a tremendous part in how black music, namely the blues and jazz were created and transitioned into later Afro-American artistic forms. Although the music changed, the content remained the same, passing down similar trials and struggles from generation to generation. As the author and poet, Leroi Jones a.k.a. Amiri Baraka explains in his writing “Blues People,” “Negro music can be seen to be the result of certain attitudes and certain specific ways of thinking about the world, and that the Negro’s music changed as he changed, reflecting shifting attitudes or consistent attitudes within changed contexts” (Jones 153). The overall mistreatment, living conditions, and lack of economic

opportunities of blacks to provide for themselves and their families in both southern and northern hemispheres due to systematic racism, were reflected in the music that they created. The feelings of anger, hopelessness, and abandonment in a society fixated on race were among the main feelings and reasons behind the earlier genres. As a result of this long and ongoing history, the psychological and social effects would be traumatic, existing and continuing for several years extending into a later period known to some as the Post Civil Right era.

Social Climate before the Music

The Civil Rights Era would be the vein of Hip Hop music's birth but research shows that there were pent up feelings with the Civil Rights movement and the untimely deaths of the most popular and effective spokesmen and advocates for the Black community, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Minister Malcolm X. The previous years would tell an even longer story of young African Americans contesting the daily oppression of Jim Crow laws. The pressures of humiliation, harassment, and often violence would be the normal routine for adults and their children who faced hateful white mobs continuously. The question became what were people to do after all the marches and bloodshed that made significant progress. The author Leon Litwick of "Fight the Power: The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement" implicates through his research that "the civil rights movement struck down the legal barriers of segregation and disenfranchisement, dismantling a racial caste system that had been evolving sometimes fitfully, over some four centuries" (Litwick 7).

What would then take place would be a more intense opposition from whites in communities and law enforcement and a growing consciousness and resistance from several men and women within the African-American community. This would give rise to voices within the many black religious and socio-political organizations such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party that spanned from New York City to California that fought for issues within the Black community. Groups like the Panthers would look to mobilize the community holistically, and ultimately destroy some of the preexisting racist practices. Members of the Black Panther organization would face imprisonment, exile, and sometimes death through different circumstances, and after the federal governments systematic dismantling of the party, the younger population felt as if it was time to regroup and channel their energy, frustration, and aggression into another sphere.

The Early Beginnings: A Bronx Tale

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The Bronx New York is known as the official setting and beginning of the hip hop culture and would feature a host of personalities and circumstances that would develop and help mold it into what it is. The culture itself would come forth after a time of massive urban planning and redevelopment that would take place from the South Bronx into Manhattan. Robert Moses, famed Urban Planner had been responsible in the 1950's for the enormous and brutal task of uprooting and redeveloping a significant stretch of the Bronx leading into Manhattan. "Statistics tell the story in the plan in which it was approximated that more than some 60,000 multi-ethnic families consisting of Blacks, Jews, and Latinos were displaced and seeking relocation, with at times poor

results” (Chang 11). Another devastating statistic was the over hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs lost with over 40% of the public sector vanishing as well. As read in publications and seen on the news, the negative effects created by bad planning and redevelopment can create different problems for families that extend further than just housing and employment. The rampant drug use, lack of adequate health care, and quality education were among the additional issues that would plague the multi-ethnic Bronx community. The creation of gangs as a result of the ineffective and chaotic governing of the city became one of the earliest problems and influences of the culture of hip-hop. The fact that some of these groups moved into formerly European neighborhoods proved to be problematic due to the still lingering race issue. As Jeff Chang explains in “Can’t Stop Won’t Stop,” Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latino families moved into the formerly Jewish, Irish, and Italian neighborhoods where white youth gangs preyed on the new arrivals in schoolyard beatdowns and running street battles” (Chang 12). As he further explains both black and brown groups would form out of self-defense and protection of their neighborhoods, and some out of hopelessness and idle time. The various gangs that would develop out of the Black and Latin groups played a huge role in some of the affairs of the communities, and for good or for worse amalgamated into different factions like the Black Spades Gang. The Spades had faced ongoing turmoil amid the white gangs who formed into whole units and brutality from white police officers who were constantly being accused of racism.

Afrika Bambaataa represents one of the first known attempts in which a former member would gather gangmembers and to try to turn a negative situation into a positive one. He was a former Black Spade member and then student at the Adlai E. Stevenson

High School in the Bronx and was inspired by a trip he had taken to Africa. “He returned later to found the Universal Zulu Nation, which was an organization of conscious rappers, B-boys (Breakdancers), graffiti artists, and other people involved in hop-hop culture. The name “Zulu Nation” was inspired by the images of Zulu warriors attacking British colonizers in the Michael Caine film “Zulu” (Asante 84). He would adopt a system and structure like the previous gangs and look to unite Black and Latin groups under the Zulu banner due to the growing conflicts and strifes in Bronx gang life. By participating in an extensive role in trying to clean up the community by both removing drug dealers off of the street and helping with community welfare events, Bambaataa serves as a example of one of the earliest positive originators of the culture. Afrika Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation would assemble members from all over the city and remove the negative elements of gang culture and promote and institute a new and safe culture. “He would also be influenced by organizations like the Black Muslims that would help create a new mood of confidence in ghettos in the Western World” (Neal 225). The Zulu Nation was a positive force and rampant gang culture would start to fizzle out of the Bronx in the mid 1970’s, but left an everlasting impression on the community.

As previously mentioned in the writing, hip-hop music has been and still continues to be influenced by various movements. One namely that still has somewhat of a presence was the Five Percent Nation, which began as an offshoot to the Nation of Islam. The Five Percent culture or known to many as the Nation of Gods and Earths (NGE) have played a significant role in the development of Hip Hop’s early phase. The group would appear to have a large following within New York’s Black and Latin youth populations. The philosophy, that black men were “gods” and women were “earths”

created in the image of Allah were adopted and practiced among many New York teenagers and young adults in the 1970's. "Five Percenters viewed knowledge, wisdom, and understanding as the foundation of their philosophy" (Ogbar 18). Along with this foundation, the group would adopt a supreme alphabet and numerology only to be understood by its members. This lifestyle would give young men and women an alternative to the limited choices and helped to remove many from an uninformed state of being. Some of the artists and groups that would be influenced by and bring the teachings into their own lyrics were Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Public Enemy, and a hosts of other New York emcees. A strong confidence and knowledge of self along with some of the Black Nationalist concepts would be embedded thematically within the lyrics of the early New York City rappers. As Marcus Reeves explains in his writing, "Somebody Scream," Public Enemy preached racial unity, upliftment, and enlightenment, but their message primarily sprang forth from dilemmas shaping the East Coast- which were racial tensions and violence igniting the five boroughs and the presence and devastating effects of crack" (Reeves 94).

Moving forward, Clive "Cool Herc" Campbell would be another character who too would be one of the earliest key contributors to the music side of hip-hop. A Bronx resident by way of Jamaica in 1967, Campbell would too influence Hip-Hop's earliest beginning by bringing the elements of Jamaican pop music and "toasting" onto the scene in the mid 1970's. "Toasting was a style of music by speaking over records through an echo chamber that took hold in Jamaica in the mid 1960's and as legend has it, was due to the limited availability of expensive western instruments" (Neal 148). Campbell would purchase music instrumentals to talk over and play them with his father's stereo system at

house parties that he would be asked to deejay and would begin to receive recognition and requests in his neighborhood for his craft. This to Campbell was a great way to keep the attention of the listeners and would make its way from house parties to local functions where many would gather to dance. Herc would get one of his first opportunities deejaying for his sister's birthday party and would later be requested within various nightclubs like the "Twilight Zone," the "Executive Playhouse," and the "Hevalo" which were growing away from the disco scene and would later open the floodgates of breakdancers. "Gradually he developed a style that was so popular that he began buying records for the instrumental breaks rather than the entire track which would later be known as "break-beats" (Neal 224). Herc's innovation would open the doors to other Deejays like Grandmaster Flash and GrandWizard Theodore who would bring their own style and skill into the creation of the music. Grand Theodore is given credit for inventing the scratch method. As the story goes, he was in his room one day listening to music and was yelled at by his mother which resulted in him accidentally bumping into his turntable as the music played. Consequently, Herc noticed a distinct scratch sound that caught his attention; which he later experimented with. It would almost immediately become an adopted use among most deejays of then and among use of the present.

The Great Grand Master Flash, a contemporary of Herc, is known as another pioneer of the deejaying component of Hip-Hop. The Great Grand Master Flash's distinctions evolve from his unique ability to blend records together in which a break in the beat could introduce a new musical beat. "He would also be the pioneer who would start his career by bringing his sound systems to the local parks, hot wiring it to a streetlight, and providing free concerts" (Chang 21). He would become one of the most

sought after deejays in New York City and still continues to perform. After the initial development of the culture, the music's growing presence from the park to the clubs would allow several artists and songs to be heard by a broader audience which featured party anthems and songs that addressed the social woes that existed. Songs like GrandMaster Flash and the Furious Five's "It's Like a Jungle" revealed the nightmarish conditions of those who lived in and around poverty, and were affected by the monstrous entrance of crack into urban areas. Other songs that celebrated the good times such as the 1979 release of "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugar Hill Gang would become the first breakthrough hip-hop record and open the 1980's to new era of expansion and talent within hip hop music. As Bakari Kitwana mentions in his writing "The Hip Hop Generation", "the 1980's were marked by an increase in economic wealth among the top 1 percent and a decrease in net wealth for households in the bottom 90 percent." (Kitwana 20). The high rates of unemployment would attack the family structure and would destroy communities due to drug related incidences and high percentages of black men being imprisoned for the possession and intent to distribute crack cocaine. President Ronald Reagan would declare and implement his national "War on Drugs" policy that would send those to prison for longer sentences for possession of crack cocaine, than those of possession of the powdered base. In most cases, Blacks would be incarcerated for longer periods due to the difficulty of obtaining the base substance. As some of these things would take place, the music would still continue and innovate to an even larger scale although society would start to face an increasing multitude of hardships.

The Def Jam Group: Rap's Rise to the World Stage

The mid 1980's & 1990's represented a focal time within Hip-Hop where the music really would take off, and there existed artists and a specific record label whose dominance made the genre even more popular and sought after. Def Jam was the recording label powerhouse that had dominated and solidified the hip-hop music scene and creation and promotion of its artists. It was originally created out of the New York University dormitory of Rick Rubin who had been a member in a local punk rock band and the original founder of the record label. Russell Simmons, an upcoming manager out of Hollis, Queens would then run his own management company called Rush Management, which would eventually become the largest management company in the genre. The two would be introduced by a known Deejay and would hit it off immediately becoming eventual partners where they would amplify the presence and popularity of the music. They would be responsible for a sleuth of solo acts and groups and still continues to impact hip-hop music and rock respectively. As Russell Simmons explains in his writing "Life and Def", "my life has largely been about promoting the anger, style, aggression, and attitude of urban America to worldwide audiences and has helped build the business of hip-hop from the ground up to a multi-billion industry while offering opportunities for economic, social, and artistic growth like no other aspect of African American culture" (Simmons XIII). Def Jam would be responsible and credited for the careers of Run D.M.C., Public Enemy, and the Beastie Boys and would help other artists and groups like Kurtis Blow and Dj Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince become household names.

Run D.M.C. would become the label's most popular act and was able to identify with both hip-hop and rock audiences following the release of the Rick Rubin produced "Walk this Way", which featured rock group Aerosmith. This hit record is said to have even brought the rock band back into the musical fold and out of obscurity. The group would also create another hit song entitled "My Adidas" which paid homage to the sneaker brand in which they would obtain a later sneaker endorsement deal for nearly \$2 million and would mark the beginning of Rap's musical growth internationally. Def Jam would also become popular with the entire country by introducing concerts that displayed their artists called the "Fresh Fest Tour". As Simmons remarks in his writing, "fans flocked to those concerts because of hit records. They saw Run D.M.C., Whodini, Kurtis Blow, and the Fat Boys" (Simmons 68). All of the groups would make a considerable amount of money with the leading act being Run D.M.C. The group would consist of Russell's younger brother Joseph Simmons (Run), the late Jason Mizzell (Jam Master Jay), and Darryl McDaniell (D.M.C.). The group is one of the most popular rap groups ever and is responsible for transforming commercial rap music introducing the genre as an authentic and urban powerhouse. The early to mid 1980's would be a decade of dominance with all the major artists and hits the label would be successful for, but the early 1990's would spawn the birth of a movement that would become permanent by a group that would take Hip Hop music into a different direction.

The Rise of Gangster Rap Music

One of the earliest examples that exist with regard to the rise of Gangster rap music is told from the street and club scenes of Los Angeles and features several societal

circumstances that are taking place. As in New York City and other black communities across the country during the late 1980's, the introduction of drugs, namely crack cocaine into urban neighborhoods had a large effect on what peoples' daily life was like. The violence and destruction as a result made life difficult for those who resided in those areas and stories of despair were constant on the evening news. The accompanying low unemployment rates, increasing gang life, drugs, and police harassments and brutality had a presence and stronghold on the Los Angeles community. The group that would articulate these presences would raise eyebrows and receive enormous amounts of attention from a large following, but also from the media, social-political organizations, and law enforcement that would scrutinize their material. N.W.A, an acronym for "Niggaz With Attitudes" would be the first commercial gangster rap group that would voice not just some, but most of the issues that were taking place in the community and became synonymous with the creation of Gangster Rap music. The group would form out of Compton Los Angeles and were made up of five members which were, Andre "Dr. Dre" Young, Eric "Easy E" Wright, Lorenzo "Mc Ren" Paterson, Antoine "Dj Yella" Carraby, and O'shea "Ice Cube" Jackson.

The group's initial formation would take place at a club called, "Eve's After Dark" which was a local nightclub that up and coming artists were performing at. Its' founding member, Eazy E was looking to remove himself from a life of crime and would be instrumental in bringing the group together. As Jeff Chang explains, "Wright would catch DJ Yella and Dr. Dre playing records while they were members in a Rap group called the "World Class Wreckin Cru" who were very popular in the area" (Chang 300). He would meet member Ice Cube while Cube was in a rap group, and would speak to

each one of them individually about the possibility of forming a group based out of South Central Los Angeles. The collaboration would be complete, as the group would eventually record their debut album in 1987 entitled “Boyz-N-The Hood”. Eazy E would later meet Jerry Heller, a Jewish music manager who had been responsible for groups and artists like Pink Floyd and Elton John. The two would work together in trying to package and promote this new Supergroup. The album featured lyrics that spoke to black youth in Los Angeles and across the entire country in similar situations that were products of their environment, in which their families were broken and the only viable solution existing was street culture; similar to the conditions surrounding the early Bronx gangs. What made this group so influential and popular with inner city and suburban consumers was it’s militant bad boy image that saturated with a rebelliousness that most teens could relate to. There were similarities in the nonchalant bad boy Rock star image as well as the former militant Black Nationalist groups that existed just twenty years before.

The group would receive its largest amount of attention releasing a single entitled “__ the Police”. This would be the moment that N.W.A. would obtain the notoriety that it desired but they weren’t expecting for the song to cause so much of a response. “In a letter that would come from Milt Ahlerich, former FBI assistant director, which expressed concern about the song, Ahlerich’s claim would be that the song advocated violence against police officers” (Rose 128). The Reverend Calvin Butts and Activist and Womens advocate, the late C. Deloris Tucker, and a hosts of other opposition would voice a fierce condemnation to the groups musical content and would make several public appearances speaking out against them. N.W.A’s videos would contain images and

words about a plethora of things like derogatory acts with women, prison, and Los Angeles gang life and the ills that were prevalent in their community.

An event that would substantiate one of the groups claims and really open the eyes of the country to the issues facing Los Angeles was when Rodney King, an African American man would be stopped by Los Angeles Police officers after failing to stop, and would be beat repeatedly on national television. It would be an absolute disgrace to those who watched, as many were outraged even in the legal proceedings of the officers charged with the beating of King. “Similar to the riots in Miami, Los Angeles exploded when a mostly white jury found four Los Angeles police officers innocent of the most serious charges for their beating of King” (Kitwana 37). The Los Angeles community and several urban districts across the country would be on high alert as chaos ripped through the streets. This event made the nation even more aware of some of the injustices that existed within the black community and made the group even more famous, ultimately solidifying them as the most popular and commercial Gangster Rap group to date.

N.W.A’s following years would come in a dismantling of the group, beginning with Ice Cube’s departure from N.W.A. when he alleged that both Eazy E and Manager Jerry Heller were complicit in failing to pay each member fairly. Ice Cube would then become a solo artist and record his debut album that would sell many records. Dr. Dre would be the next N.W.A. member to depart the group concurring with Ice Cube’s claim that Wright and Heller’s activities were underhanded. He represented the biggest blow to the group as he would be the main producer and centerpiece of the N.W.A movement with his musical expertise, but would later be obtained through an up and coming CEO and businessman named Marion “Suge” Knight who was looking to establish a more

refined and gangster record label. The transition from Ruthless Records for Dre to the new Death Row Records helped advance his career and allowed him to have his musical and creative freedom and just compensation that he was slighted while under Jerry Heller's management. Marion "Suge" Knight would be accused of threatening Eric "Easy E" Wright by forcing him to release Dr. Dre out of a recording contract that he held with Ruthless Records. Easy E would launch a solo career and would die years later from complications of AIDS and his death would shock the entire Hip Hop community. I can remember being at a local barbershop and in disbelief that one of hip-hop's main men would die. Although tragic, it wasn't a shock to those who knew him for being promiscuous, but it ironically served the hip-hop community well by waking up people to the power of the disease in which awareness was increased. N.W.A's legacy and accomplishments would be visible within a sleuth of future rap artists and groups and would cement them into one of the most celebrated acts ever, in which they would influence both East and West coast hip-hop music.

Record Labels: Ambition, Betrayal, & Chaos

To successfully compete in the arena of Hip Hop music as an artist, producer, or CEO there has to be a unique quality and ethic that radiates, be it good or bad. The mid to late 90's would showcase two powerful record labels that would leave indelible marks on not only the genre of hip-hop music, but also the entire music industry. The events that would unfold within a relatively short period of time would be something to initially celebrate and later mourn. The Bad Boy Entertainment and Death Row Records musical

conflict hyped by massive media outlets and ingested by hungry consumers is a relatively story about desire, success, perceived betrayal, ego's.

New York City where Harlem native and CEO of Bad Boy Entertainment, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs along with his key artist and Brooklyn emcee, Christopher "The Notorious Big" Wallace would represent New York's shot to be the primary players of the East Coast attempt to dominate the airwaves and record sales. The previous years had seen a sheer dominance by the West Coast and a hungry New York population that enjoyed the musical successes of a sleuth of New York emcees. Combs would begin his career as an intern for Andre Harrell at Uptown Records while traveling from Washington D.C.'s Howard University days out of the week. Some years later, after hard work and the right connections, Bad Boy Entertainment would be a household rap label after Combs would ink a major distributive deal with Clive Davis of Arista Records. The Notorious Big" or "Biggie" to many, was looking for a way to leave the streets of Fulton Avenue in the city's Brooklyn section and would meet Combs through acquaintances within the genre. The two would later record Wallace's debut LP, "Ready to Die" and receive much appraise from rap listeners due to the albums edgy but introspective look into the life of a drug dealer. The almost immediate success would allow Wallace to get off the streets and pursue a passion that he acquired while growing up.

CEO Marion "Suge" Knight, a former USC college football player and previous bodyguard for Rhythm and Blues singer Bobby Brown would run Death Row Records and had already started to make a name for himself gaining respect for his intimidating and get the job done mentality. Knight would make Shakur Death Row's main artist following his release from prison for an alleged Rape conviction in 1995. Suge Knight's

main cast of musical artists consisted of super producer, Andre “Dr. Dre” Young, Snoop Doggy Dogg and the Dogg Pound, and Shakur.

The story of Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace’s relationship begins, as Wallace was a close friend of Shakur’s during Shakur’s initial rap start following his affiliation with rap group, Digital Underground. The beef between the two and their camps stems after it was alleged that while Tupac was at a Manhattan recording studio in 1994, was shot after recording in which he was also robbed of \$40,000 worth of jewelry. Shakur would allege that Sean Combs and Wallace were somehow responsible and knew the event would transpire. A very short time afterwards, Shakur would release musical tracks taunting Wallace and the entire Bad Boy camp in which he claims to have slept with his wife, R&B singer, Faith Evans. During a segment on the 1995 Source Hip Hop Awards, Suge Knight upon an acceptance of an award, would make an indirect comment to the audience about a specific CEO’s constant participation in their artist’s videos. This would be noticed by most watching as an insult to Combs and his Bad Boy camp for his constant appearances in their videos. This would also be one of the moments that the East Coast/West Coast rivalry became talked about and amplified by the media.

“In the notorious East Coast/West Coast divide, regional affiliation was a casual element in the deaths of Shakur and Wallace” (Perry 21) The fact that two men were able to assume the roles of leaders of two coasts showed the intrigue of followers in which album sales and discussions increased for both. Shortly after Shakur’s release of his final LP, “All Eyes on Me”, Shakur would succumb to multiple gunshot wounds on a large Las Vegas Boulevard while leaving a Mike Tyson fight that had just taken place. His murder would go unsolved and would become the subject of many and still continuing

conspiracy theories. He would ultimately become the largest Rap selling artist ever and an enigmatic icon across the globe. Six months after Shakur's death, Wallace would too be gunned down on a Los Angeles Strip following the Soul Train Awards and his death would also become the subject of conspiracies. It is said that Wallace's death was in revenge of Shakur who was murdered months back although it never had been proved that he was involved. The deaths of both Wallace and Shakur shocked the rap community in that two of Rap's leading men were gunned down eerily, like the deaths of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Following the years after the deaths of both Wallace and Shakur, the beef amplified by the media and ingested by consumers would come to an end.

Tupac Shakur: Hip Hop's Fallen Martyr

I do not mind going out on a limb in saying that Tupac Shakur, the man might have been the typical at times imperfect human being. His music voiced the various joys and pains of the black community and those who are poorly misrepresented. His musical catalogue could be described among many as introspective, yet controversially extensive and continues to represent the issues that catch the attention of not only youth, but those of age. His lyrically pressing topics of some of society's harsh realities which include but aren't limited to urban living, survival, and politics command the attention of the young and old. These songs are heard through many of the world's Ipods and stereos and continue to interest many in which some of his some of his recordings have even been incorporated into university lectures and classrooms for discussion.

Tupac's personal views on the various issues he rapped about could possibly be seen as a result of his upbringing, experiences, and observations. His mother Afeni Shakur, a former Black Panther member and current Philanthropist would help instill in him a consciousness and knowledge about his surroundings during his maturation. When listening to some of the interviews and music of Tupac, you get a sense that he was an often reflective, yet compassionate person who had respect for others and understood that society was ill and that it was important to address those ills. Like Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and other Black Panthers, Shakur in my mind comes off as a defender and voice of the black community and the hip-hop community. His mother through the teachings within the Black Panther party expressed to him from an early age the importance of community organizing and taught him about his role in society. His at-times absent biological father and stepfather would be members within the Black Panther Party and from there you can see his identification with the black power unity movement. As we understand, the Black Panther Party was a black political and social organization that looked to improve the lives of the black community by fighting against those who looked to oppress. What was also obvious to me about Shakur was that he clearly identified and spoke for those with those who resided in urban areas, especially gaining approval from his "thug life" mantra. The music he put out was representative from those who are affected by poverty and other social issues such as racist police brutality, drugs, and unemployment. In the film, "Tupac Resurrection", a piece by MTV Films and his mother's' Amaru Entertainment that documents his life with a montage of personal interviews and audio clips, one gets an immense feel for the type of person he was. In the very beginning, Tupac's voice is heard and speaks on the topic of death and explains that

most people are selfish in their view that death is a bad thing. He disagrees that isn't a bad thing by saying the person who dies is now away from all the bad things that takes place on earth. He would later reveal that he had received a prophecy that he would die as the result of gunshot wounds. Shakur had said that he felt like he would be shot because people wanted to harm him and didn't like him. Accepting of this revelation he still expressed appreciation for God for all that he received and insisted that it was in hands.

Another area in his music that would receive scrutiny would be in his messages and attitudes towards women. As heard and shown through his music, Tupac had a healthy relationship with his mother who would teach him the importance of women but some of his music would often appear contrary. Songs like "I Get Around" and "Keep ya Head Up" were examples of his contradicting lyrics and most would have a hard time deciphering his stance on women. Years after his death, Shakur is still mentioned as among one of the greatest rappers and continues to sell records and memorabilia.

The Ladies Point of View

The women emcees within hip-hop music have been overshadowed and somewhat of an anomaly in the last few years amongst a genre and industry of popular male dominated peers who constantly appear in tropical locations with half-dressed females who desire their attention. Some of the earliest female lyricists come from a background and tradition of family supporting and socioeconomic empowering music whose main target were the black community. However, with the rise of male groups like "N.W.A." and "2 Live Crew" whose several songs and videos contain words or images degrading women, these albums sold popularly and ultimately contributed or continued

the negative portrayals and misconceptions of black women. Although there had always been female artists who fulfilled or acted out stereotypes, the latest songs and videos have featured many female artists that glamorize materialistic lifestyles. Most people uncultured to hip-hop are unaware that the ladies have played a significant part in the influence of hip hop music by displaying the same originality and lyrical dexterity as men, but from a females' perspective. In the opening chapter of Tricia Rose's "Black Noise", she mentions that music and cultural critics point out that black women rappers are rare examples of aggressive pro-women lyricists in popular music, and defend rap's ghetto stories as real-life reflections that draw attention to the burning problems of racism and economic oppression" (Rose 1). This has been true in more recent years and it is largely been due to the fact that both record companies and certain media networks have profited enormously from negative images, and they choose not to promote the positive images. In my most recent observations of some the larger networks like Black Entertainment Television (BET) and Music Television (MTV), it seems that networks like these have bought into female artists like Foxy Brown and Trina because they promote flashy and hypersexual lifestyles in their videos. These females artists like their male counterparts choose to place greater emphasis instant gratification on the finer things in life. From the early 1980's to the 1990's, groups like Salt 'N' Pepa and Queen Latifah spoke consistently on societal topics such as oppression, domestic violence, and A.I.D.S., while also expressing female worth and the significance of the family.

Two females who represent both sides in terms of content are Lauryn Hill and Lil' Kim. Both of these artists' whose debut albums were a pivotal representation of a shift in consciousness with regard to how women are portrayed in Hip Hop music, and they are

seen as respected icons within their sect of their genre. Prior to becoming solo, Lauren Hill was a member of the popular Rap group “The Fugees”. Lauren Hill received International acclaim for her multi-platinum solo album entitled, “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill”. Lauren Hill’s style has been described as “soulful and introspective.” She has written several hit songs that have made their way on to the Billboard charts, and she has been on an array of magazine covers, and has received both Grammy and American Music Awards. She represents one of the rare examples of a female artist who refuses to compromise her integrity or sexuality, as several more recent female artists have done to sell records and gain exposure. Her album featured songs like, “That Thing” which addresses issues of relationships and the respect that women should have for themselves was a hit and one of her most impressive singles. Other positive topics that Hill’s album addressed were motherhood and spirituality in such songs as “Zion” and “The Miseducation”. As Imani Perry adds, “her compositions make use of the black English of the Northeast and include references to soul and reggae, as well as to black female heroines and announced the neo-black pride movement for the hip hop generation both in substance and style amid a tide of watered-down ultra-materialistic hip hop in the public eye” (Perry 193). Hill was an example of a female rapper that chose not to submit to the pressure and expectations of a male dominated genre that influenced the ladies to imitate its’ male counterparts by rapping about things without sustenance. As one of the rare examples of current female rappers who hasn’t given in to stereotypes, she would be seen as an example of what’s positive in hip hop music by contributing commentary musically that draws attention and answers to societal issues.

Kimberly “Lil Kim” Jones might be the antithesis of Lauryn Hill and represents the female rapper who displays beauty, loyalty for those around her, and a sheer lust for the material world. Kim started off as a member in the Notorious B.I.G.’s “Junior Mafia” crew as the only female emcee. It was obvious to those who heard her that she packed a punch lyrically and, therefore she was given enormous amounts of respect from some of the top male peers. Kim carried the bravado of her male counterparts removing almost all of the femininity applied to women in hip-hop. In the lyrics of the song “No Time” off of her solo debut album entitled, “Hard Core”, the sassy and materialistic lyricist writes:

“I Mama, Ms. Ivana, usually rock da Prada, sometimes Gabana, Stick you for you cream and ya riches, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Demi Moore, Princess Diana, and all them rich bitches”

Lyrics of this nature and additional lyrics that Lil’ Kim would record would display the desire, lust, and accumulation of financial gains by any means necessary. The fact that she continuously mentioned the names of brand name clothing and automobiles is what made her appealing to most women; and the fact that she was a highly hypersexual woman and wasn’t afraid to express it in rhyme, made her appealing to male listeners. Kim’s raunchy insert in the inside cover to her debut solo album is an example of her nonchalance, in which the photo shows Kim in a sexually suggestive position. Lil’ Kim seldom spoke on issues like love and oppression, but her ultimate goal was to promote and establish her own name and brand. Kim’s brand would allow her the opportunity to obtain awards and accolades like Hill, and be featured on other artist’s albums and in other artists’ videos. It became obvious to me that upon the plastic surgery that she would receive and later appearances on shows like “Dancing With the Stars” that she wasn’t looking to connect with the hip-hop audience any longer, but started to have an affinity with the more popular entertainment culture that promotes just about anything

and which dominates radio, television, and film. As Imani Perry explains “she has an impressive aggressive sexual presence, and she has often articulated a sexual objectivity through words and as she had developed as an entertainer, it has become clear that her image is complicit in the oppressive language of American cinematography in regards to women’s sexuality” (Perry 181). To the listeners, male artists who are heard on the radio fulfill stereotypes that constantly objectify women in a demeaning manner and Lil Kim is a great assistance in perpetuating this. Lil’ Kim as shown in her videos and concerts, parading in front of groups of men like a trophy, is more than aware that “sex sells”. On an even larger scale we could attribute this type of behavior to American culture as a whole, just by taking a look at popular culture and the variety of lifestyles that it promotes and esteems. 50 Cent, Lil’ Wayne, and other popular Rap acts are not the beginning of this trend and they have only followed in the paths of groups like “N.W.A” and “Two Live Crew” who set some of the earliest bars within hip-hop of exploiting women and diminishing the popularity and promotion of the female emcee.

Conclusion: Summations and the Future of Hip Hop

Off of Hip Hop Artist Mos Def’s 1999 LP entitled “Black on Both Sides”, the rapper and actor converses with himself on a intro song, entitled “Fear Not of Man” where he addresses the direction of where Hip Hop is headed. It’s very relevant and still can be applied to the current times. The Brooklyn emcee plunges into a third person-like monologue over a light drummed verse remarking:

“People be askin me all the time,
 "Yo Mos, what's gettin ready to happen with Hip-Hop?"
 (Where do you think Hip-Hop is goin?)
 I tell em, "You know what's gonna happen with Hip-Hop?”

Whatever's happening with us",
 If we smoked out, Hip-Hop is gonna be smoked out
 If we doin alright, Hip-Hop is gonna be doin alright
 People talk about Hip-Hop like it's some giant livin in the hillside
 comin down to visit the townspeople
 We are Hip-Hop
 Me, you, everybody, we are Hip-Hop
 So Hip-Hop is goin where we goin
 So the next time you ask yourself where Hip-Hop is goin
 ask yourself.. where am I goin? How am I doin?
 Til you get a clear idea
 So.. if Hip-Hop is about the people,
 Hip-Hop won't get better until the people get better."

The response is a simple yet profound analysis of the relationship between society's progress and the music that it puts out. Hip Hop music is representative of our setbacks as well as our celebrations. Within the last decade the world has experienced both tragic and exciting moments. The economy, terrorism, climate issues, and a string of other social topics that have caught most folk's attention are mentioned constantly in songs. The musical content quality appeared to have gone off course once commercialism would influence and control the direction of the music. Nelson George mentions in his "Hip Hop America" writing that "black youth culture and mass media have been on a collision course with each other for the last two decades and that advertisers, magazines, fashion companies and media conglomerates like Time Warner have embraced hip hop as a way to reach the youth" (George IX). Radio and television have played a huge part in the promotion of the music and it's artists. The right amount of exposure can mean the difference between someone going gold (500,000 records sold) and the other who may become platinum (1,000,000 records). A very good example being the emcees, Nas and Jay-Z. "More recently, given rap's commercial success alongside limited employment options beyond minimum wage jobs for young blacks, hip-hop's cultural movement at

the local is increasingly marked by an entrepreneurial element. On the West Coast, East Coast in southern and northern cities, and in rural and suburban areas in between, young blacks are pressing their own cd's and selling them out of the trunk" (Kitwana 199).

As a person that listens to not only hip-hop but other genres as well, I do find myself frustrated and excited with the music. What bothers me about the current state is that I've listened to the radio and have sat on many occasions in awe over the constant repetition of some artist's music and the exclusion of others. I guess I can be considered somewhat foolish in thinking that only what I like should be promoted. The conversations nowadays about what artists are the nicest in their craft are still humorously heated and comical amongst debates with some of my closest acquaintances. I appreciate artists like Nas, Mos Def, Pharoahe Monche and the countless emcees who maintain their integrity despite the fact that their record sales may not equate to platinum. They are given attention to and homage from the collective genre of hip hop music listeners while creatively using the power of speech and music to inspire, inform, and entertain. The love and work ethic of those looking to get better and innovate is what keeps me interested. There is the possibility that I may outgrow the music one day as some of us do some things in life but for now, I'll continue to keep my ears out for melodic beats and superbly written stanzas. What I've learned over the years is that Hip Hop music is about the people. It can be contradicting and can take on many different forms. It's about recycled originality and musical creativity, entrepreneurship, and the ability to express oneself. Like it's predecessors, it reflects upon the events that take place not only in our communities, but also in others. It should not be seen as force that will change the world but be seen as just what it is, art and entertainment. The songs that we may hear from the

most peaceful to the most violent are no different than the movies that Hollywood is responsible for putting into theaters. Those who criticize without properly acknowledging the totality of what the music is about aren't being fair enough in their assessment.

One of the issues that have caught my attention in the more recent times is that some younger artists that have followed my generation have been frustrated with the criticisms of those older artists because of the latter's feeling that the culture has lost its essence. Older artists should be acknowledged and respected but should be teachers to the upcoming generation of the dynamics and the rich history of how the music became what it is and the reinforcement of what it should be based on their interpretation. The youth would begin to see that there isn't a sense of the same camaraderie that existed when the culture first came into being. I think that a lot of young artists are misinformed as to the history and relevance of the older material that came in the 80's and 90's. It might serve them well to get a feel of what the people were doing and what their situations were. In late 2008 I could remember reading an article about Rapper "Ice-T" expressing his disinterest in some of the material being put out and referenced the young platinum artist "Souljah Boy Tell Em" as one of the reasons the genre had become what it was. The Hip Hop star would quickly respond questioning the legitimacy of the veteran rapper/actor as if to place an asterisk of irrelevance next to his career. This to me represented both a bad example of constructive criticism from Ice-T and a poor reply from the young star. The only way to iron out differences in this aspect is through meaningful dialogue and respect for ones current accomplishments and pasts. It would have been interesting if both artists would have done a song together rather than address each other on video snippets. It might have been a great way to deflate the much-received negative attention.

On the very day following the inauguration of Barack Obama, first African-American President of the United States, I found myself writing some of this Capstone project in stressful increments with the intent to deliver a thorough analysis of the musical body of Hip Hop Culture and it's relationship to society. It became clearer to me that its artists could do even more positive if they came together more often. The effects that hip hop and this past election alone has had with artists can be seen as meaningful in that it had helped influence the youth and adults to take part in democracy. With the controversies that have tarnished Hip Hop's image over the years, the time and dedication of artists to collaborate with the hopes of trying to better society display commendable.

What I can say about Hip hop is that at times when I've had some troubling moments that I would listen to certain artists who put some of life's issues into perspective on record and I could relate. When the content of the music is closely examined along with the manner and tone in which artists express themselves, it is important to understand that it's an individualistic perspective. In some of my experiences in speaking with older adults who were brought up in different eras, discussing the subject of the music has at times been frustrating. I've been under the impression that they consider the music illegitimate, but when the moments right, I always interject to them that my music flows through the veins of some of their favorite artists and songs. What catches the attention of the followers of Hip Hop is the ability for the emcee to identify and articulate with the values and opinions. To go out on a limb and vent their frustrations and dismays as well as their joys can be a moment of vicariousness for the fan. What makes the music so strong and impressive is the ability of artists and producers to constantly recreate and innovate. I hope to see a shift in content and feel that

it may possibly happen given the current promotion and over-saturation of materialism and gangster lifestyles. The fact is that in these difficult economic times, millions upon millions are unemployed and without adequate education and healthcare so how can they identify with these lifestyles we constantly see. Hip Hop enthusiasts crave a sense of originality and realism rather fantasy. I am highly appreciate for groups that provide a breath of fresh air like The Roots, Black Star, and newer artists like Lupe Fiasco and Asher Roth who are taking the genre in the right direction by not complying with the status quos of who has the most money and women but by promoting and expressing their opinions about other social commentaries. I guess time will only tell what influence and impact these artists and the many upcoming acts will have on a generation who only is familiar with and listens to the more popular artists like Lil' Wayne and 50 Cent. The subject of Hip Hop music is exhaustive but very intriguing and represents something dear to me and I hope that many would try to fairly observe and experience it for themselves.

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