

Authenticity and Keeping it Real: Hip-Hop's Conversion to Hip-Pop (I)

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Origins

A culture is passed down and maintained through its art. Theater, dance, visual art, and literature teach each generation the traditions, customs, and history of a people. During the mid-seventies, in the parks of the ghettos and projects of Brooklyn and the Bronx, in New York City, a new culture was cultivated. Hip-Hop. DJs such as Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Africa Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation, took a page from Jamaican sound systems and started highjacking electricity from the street lights to play records in the parks. Using basic technology, they tore apart records and combined their sounds with others, creating a new sound. MCs, or Mic Controllers, directed crowds as to what dances to do, hyped them up, and celebrated the DJ and his prowess. Without a dance floor, youth used cardboard and created a whole new way to dance to match the new music. All of this was happening at the same time as the graffiti movement was invading the

city's walls and trains. Yet, graffiti was being co-opted by the New York art world, through the work of Keith Haring and Jamaican American Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Fast forward to 1984. MCing was in danger of being a novelty, and it appeared that the records from which the DJs were drawing were going out of style. Break Dancing was going strong, but if the music was in danger, it's dancing was equally in danger. Enter Run-DMC. The MC was pushed to the forefront; DJ Jam Master Jay drew on rock 'n' roll music. It was like an eruption. Their 'Rock Box' video reached out into the suburbs thanks to the infant MTV. Their collaboration with Aerosmith, a few years later, kicked the door down completely. Groups of MC's and DJ's turned producers appeared as if out of nowhere. Boogie Down Productions, Ultramagnetic MC's, Public Enemy, LL Cool J, Beastie Boys, Gangstarr, Nice 'n' Smooth, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, Eric B and Rakim, Slick Rick, Kool G Rap, Biz Markie, Dougie Fresh, EPMD, MC Lyte, Queen Latifa, Native Tongues (Tribe Called Quest, De La

Soul, and Leaders of the New School), Digable Planets, Pete Rock and CL Smooth, Big Daddy Kane, Redman, Keith Murray, Tupac, 3rd Bass, and The Wu-Tang Clan are just a few of the crews that appeared. They all sounded completely different from one another. MTV helped spread this new sound across the country. The *Source* and *Rap Pages* began giving Hip-Hop a journalistic outlet. Ghettos everywhere began sprouting Hip-Hop. The Geto Boys came from Houston. Ice T, Ice Cube, and NWA painted frightening pictures of life in LA. 2 Live Crew celebrated sex and the life of Miami. Rap was spreading everywhere.

Authenticity was important to these crews. It was defined by originality of sound. "Biting" was a crime punishable by a 'dissed' record. The battle between KRS-One and MC Shan destroyed Shan's credibility (it was a series of records debating the birthplace of Hip-Hop). An MC had to be able to freestyle, battle, tell stories, and do it without saying it like anyone else alive. It didn't matter that the Fresh Prince was rapping about "How Parents Just Don't Understand" and that Public Enemy was yelling "Fight the Power"—they still toured together. DJs began using sampling technology, which rapidly advanced their ability to create newer soundscapes. Jazz, Reggae, Funk, Post Punk, and Heavy Metal all began to be found on Hip-Hop records. These artists always rapped about Hip-Hop reverentially, as if to protect it and keep it alive. The history was always told from the perspective of both the DJ/Producer and MC. This kept the music in the parks in its own way, by reminding everyone that Hip-Hop had started on the streets and that without question, that was where it belonged. Hip-Hop allows a voiceless people to reach out to the world and voice their rage, ideas, and to celebrate success no matter how fleeting it may be.

A transition

1994 was to be a pivotal year in Hip-Hop. Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg had recently introduced G-Funk to the world; gangsta rap was all the rage. The year before, the Wu-Tang Clan had declared: "Cash Rules Everything Around Me." Yet, the year saw three classics released that would change the face of Hip-Hop. Nas's "Illmatic," Notorious B.I.G.'s "Ready to Die," and Common's "Resurrection." Nas's "Illmatic" was to end the golden era of Hip-Hop, Biggie's "Ready to Die" showed the future, and Common's "Resurrection" sparked the first East Coast vs. West Coast feud.

"Illmatic" may be the best example of Hip-Hop ever put to tape, wax or cd. Lyrically, he reached out to the world by painting a picture of his own world. I was feeling his "NY State of Mind" in Virginia Beach. He reached out to his father to appear with him on his album. Absentee fathers are an epidemic in the black communities of the inner cities in the United States. It is a fact that some rappers use that as an excuse for bad behavior or ignorant opinions, and some critics of rap do the same thing. The production of the album was helmed by the best of the best, a team that would be called the best of Hip-Hop's Golden Age. DJ Premier, Pete Rock, Large Professor, Q-Tip, and L.E.S. painted a movie score for Nas to tell his stories about the people around him. "One Love" is perhaps the best song ever written about prison. It captures the heartache one feels over being separated from the world; it also makes you think that it could be you in there. Through his career, Nas has taken many paths, playing the part of crack dealer, Mafia don, gangsta, and prophet. He has called himself 'God's Son.' Something happened to Nas though with his album "Hip-Hop is Dead." The entire album focused on the state of hip-hop culture at the end of the first



Graffiti in Pittsburgh

decade of this new millennium. His last album was pushed back because he wanted the title to be “Nigger” and it dealt with race in the United States at a time when the country was in the process of electing a black president. He faced all of critics and now finds himself with the audience, experience and authority to speak out.

Biggie’s single “Big Poppa” opened the floodgates for flossin. Suddenly you could get away with stealing whole songs. Rapping about money became all the rage. In fact, you weren’t real without money. ‘Keepin it Real’ suddenly meant something different. Authenticity became tied to your criminal roots, how ghetto you were. If your record didn’t go platinum, it was deemed a failure. Albums began to have formulas; club song, sex skit, hot guests, and producers of the moment. The kids were eating it all up. 50 Cent was shot nine times and he became rapper of the moment. Dr. Dre signed the white Eminem and sold 80 million records. The record companies were raking it all in and kept on dishing it out. Now, success is success, and there were bright spots—Jay-Z, Missy Elliot and Outkast

come to mind. Any Hip-Hop that adhered to the old standards or attempted to push the envelope was called ‘backpacker’ Hip-Hop due to its popularity on college campuses. Many crews from the golden age couldn’t bridge the gap into this bright new world. “Fuck you pay me” replaced “Last night a DJ saved my life.” Violence, money, sex. This wasn’t ‘Wild Style,’ it was ‘Scarface.’ In this environment, it isn’t surprising that some died. Biggie and Tupac died in a feud between the two of them. Big L would be shot. Jam Master Jay would suffer the same fate. Some felt that a lyrical feud between Jay-Z and Nas would have sinister consequences. All the while, fans kept pouring money into Hip-Hop and record execs’ pockets kept getting fatter. One could argue that this was good, progress, success, and recognition.

The consequences

Despite the sales, politicians still hollered about censorship: moral crusaders and racists hollered for the music to be taken off the television and radio. What they didn’t know was that the record industry, the fans, and the

artists themselves were helping accomplish what all the naysayers couldn't. The institutionalization of Hip-Hop has taken away the power of Hip-Hop's voice by simply turning it into Hit-Pop. The formula has been set for so long, it is what younger generations look at as 'real' or authentic Hip-Hop. Any room for new voices has been crowded out. That is why it is so important that Hip-Hop has spread across the world and captured people's hearts. It can still give voice to the voiceless. It can still be dangerous, and should be. It can be new and ancient at the same time. Reading about Hip-Hop in *ISLAS* gave me great hope.

Lastly, is Common's "Resurrection." It contains a love song to Hip-Hop called "I Used to Love H.E.R." The track takes a look back and a serious look forward over the landscape of Hip-Hop; in the end, Common decides that he loves H.E.R. for better or worse. Ice Cube took umbrage at Common's description of West Coast Hip-Hop and fired the first salvo in the East Coast-West Coast

feud that would eventually claim the lives of both Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur. The lyrics of the song are loving and worth reading, even if they are critical.

Towards a Part II

A funny thing happened on the way to Hip-Hop's funeral. The economic situation has changed in the U.S., making the lifestyle and shallow values of what had come to represent Hip-Hop culture seem frivolous and unpalatable. The recording industry has collapsed due to this, and new technology has given Hip-Hop back to the people. The Internet and beat-making programs have made it possible for Hip-Hop to thrive worldwide, without ever taking its eyes off the block and neighborhood in which it is made. Hip-Hop is alive and well again, in every city, every ghetto and on every corner. It's newly found independence is also worth an examination of its reality.