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# Hip Hop Culture: History and Trajectory

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Hip Hop Culture: History and Trajectory

by

R. Jonathan Riesch  
B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2002

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts Degree

Department of History

in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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Approved by:

Dr. Robbie Lieberman, Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
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While trying to find common ground, my sixty-year-old father-in-law and I began talking about his new job as a speech communications instructor at Eastern Illinois University and my position as a teaching assistant in Southern Illinois University's history department. As he spoke about the speeches that he had assigned to his classes he stopped to ask me what "hip hop" is.<sup>1</sup> He explained further that two of his students had asked to do speeches on hip hop and he was not sure if it would be "an appropriate topic." Not knowing exactly how to bridge this generational (and cultural) divide, I tried to explain what I knew of hip hop. I quickly realized that my understanding of hip hop was hard to express. Having recently become interested in the HBO series *Russell Simmons' Presents Def Poetry*, I played a video tape of one of the episodes, somehow thinking that thirty minutes of hip hop poetry could fill my father-in-law in on a subculture with a thirty year history.<sup>2</sup>

Since hip hop's origins during the mid-1970s it has grown from a localized urban-arts pastime to a multi-billion dollar a year industry. Its effects have spread from the urban streets to classrooms and boardrooms. The impoverished youths of African and Latin ancestry that once comprised the entire cast and audience of this subculture are now amid a rainbow of economic, generational, and ethnic diversity. How did a subculture that was, in large part, the most overlooked and unappreciated segment of society come to dominate a large segment of modern popular culture? The objective of this project is to determine what hip hop culture is, how it is being defined by the artist creating it, and how it will continue to gain significance by examining its history and its evolution as a

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<sup>1</sup> "Hip hop" is used as both an adjective and a noun throughout this paper. When used as an adjective it will include a hyphen. According to Microsoft Word 2000, "hip hop" requires a hyphen regardless of its use in written language. Some authors include the hyphen when "hip hop" is used as a noun, but most do not.

<sup>2</sup> My father-in-law, Jim Coleman, is used here as a representative of typical American middle-class values and cultural awareness. He married his wife at relatively young age, had three daughters, is a regularly attending Catholic ("for the community aspect, not for the dogma") and is tolerant of my, sometime, extremely liberal views of society.

topic of academic and popular interest.

The roots of hip hop lay at the intersection of the political protest movements of Black Nationalism of the early 1970s and the impoverished ghettos of urban America.<sup>3</sup> How to define hip hop is somewhat problematic.<sup>4</sup> Hip hop is used as a noun or an adjective. It is often used interchangeably with the word “rap” to describe urban spoken-word music. It is also used to describe clothing, language, attitude, and customs. In short, hip hop is a culture. However, hip hop was not always such a broadly defined term. Originally, hip hop referred to the culture of the Latin and African-American youths centered around the Bronx, New York who were graffiti artists, break-dancers, turntablists, and emcees.<sup>5</sup> In the early years of hip hop, the actual participants (or creators) of the arts were referred to by the medium in which they were involved (i.e. taggers, DJs, break-dancers, breakers, or b-boys, and rappers or MCs). As these arts became more and more popular around New York, the term hip hop came to define the overall culture related to all four of the mediums.<sup>6</sup> One of the most important aspects of hip-hop culture is being authentic. There are three main ways in which hip hop artist establish authenticity: being true to themselves (i.e. being original and not trying to fit in), reflecting the community from which they are coming, and having an understanding and respect for the styles and origins of early hip hop.

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<sup>3</sup> Errol A. Henderson, “Black Nationalism and Rap Music,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 3 (1996): 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> “Hip hop”’s usage has changed over time. From the beginnings of the urban styles that came to be known as hip hop in the early 1970s until the first commercially successful musical recordings, “b-boy” was more commonly used to describe the people of the urban community that identified with the break-beat driven DJ music and dance styles. Once the verbalization of “toasts” (discussed later) evolved into MCs (discussed later), improvisational scat-type sounds produced by performers often included the combinations of the words “hip” and “hop.” DJ Lovebug Starski is credited with coining the term “hip hop” to describe this style of music. As the most recognizable aspect of this urban culture, hip hop started to be used to describe all aspects of this urban culture according to “And You Don’t Stop: 30 Years of Hip Hop” (part 1), VH1 television channel mini-series, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> These elements of hip hop are colloquially known as taggers, DJs, b-boys and b-girl or breakers, and MCs or rappers, Nelson George et al., *Fresh Hip Hop Don’t Stop* (New York: Random House, 1985), XIX; Cookie Lommel, *The History of Rap Music* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 18-20.

<sup>6</sup> George, XIX; Lommel, 20.

The analysis in this paper will focus on the auditory mediums, DJing and rapping. These two forms of hip hop have had an increasing impact on the larger society, whereas graffiti artists have been vilified as vandals for their tagging of subway trains and public buildings,<sup>7</sup> and break-dancing gave way to new styles of dance by the mid-1980s. DJing and rapping have had much more consistent developments over the last thirty years.<sup>8</sup> While innovations in sound production and lyrical content have driven rap music's<sup>9</sup> evolution, the key to the impact of hip hop on the larger society has come from the financial successes that rap music have yielded for the business world. The visual arts form that was once associated with hip-hop culture has been co-opted by the business world as ad campaigns and slogans.<sup>10</sup> Hip hop dance, although evolving away from break-dancing, still exists but has very little detectable impact on the larger society. By focusing on the auditory forms of hip hop culture one can understand its growth from an organic mix of art and entertainment to an economically driven industry.

Hip hop's newness makes it difficult to contextualize. Hip-hop culture is defined, in part, by the creators of the arts. However, it is also defined by the society around it. The tricky part is that to be hip hop (i.e. to represent hip hop culture) only requires that an individual self-associates with this culture. Anyone of any age or birthplace who listens to rap music, dresses in the styles of hip hop, or speaks in a contemporary urban dialect is considered by both the general public and the hip hop community (for the most part) as

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<sup>7</sup> As stated by graffiti artist Wisk One Wca in an interview with Mystic for the online website, guerillaone.com, 2 Nov 1989, [http://www.guerillaone.com/interviews\\_11\\_99/wisk.htm](http://www.guerillaone.com/interviews_11_99/wisk.htm) (accessed January 16, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Rap music is generally the combination of spoken-word lyrics created by the MC or rapper articulated in the rapper's particular style, tempo, and/or tone to the sounds created by the DJ using a variety of prerecorded sounds and sometimes sounds created for a live audience using turntables employing various techniques that have come to be associated with DJing.

<sup>10</sup> An argument can be made that music videos, movies, and the spread of graffiti-inspired marketing are the descendants of taggers. However, graffiti artists have come to be a smaller and smaller part of modern hip hop culture.

representing the culture. If the criteria to be part of hip hop culture is simply self-identification or the presumption by the society that an individual embodies any one (or more) of a variety of characteristics or preferences to hip hop culture, then there are millions of primary sources to analyze. As a history student examining hip-hop culture, this project can be seen as representing hip hop. Ultimately, researchers have to be aware of the overlapping of sources as both primary and secondary. The writings of Michael Eric Dyson<sup>11</sup> and Nelson George<sup>12</sup> are academic examinations of hip hop culture; however, these authors are also greatly informed on this topic by their backgrounds living in urban centers.

This is not to say that all people who represent hip hop have equal standing. Hip hop is greatly about image. As a white thirtysomething male, I do not embody a typical member of the hip-hop community. Upon further inspection I do fit the overall definition for authenticity. To a twelve-year-old African-American kid I might be the furthest thing from hip hop, but to the people who have been part of the community since its birth, it is less about image and more about substance. By examining the writings of true hip hop icons (Chuck D, Ice-T, KRS-One) it becomes clear that image is much less important with age. Chuck D chides emerging rap star Kanye West for giving the youth the wrong impression when he writes songs about how college is for suckers.<sup>13</sup> So why does image play such a vital role in modern hip-hop culture? The most obvious answer is that hip-hop culture and the hip-hop industry are two distinctly separate things. Academic discussions regarding hip hop look at how this subculture formed, what the connecting

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Eric Dyson has written several books on modern African-American culture and the role and value of hip hop in contemporary society.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson George has written three books on hip hop culture. Each book has expanded his analysis of hip hop as the culture has intersected with the dominant culture.

<sup>13</sup> Chuck D: Spoken Word Tour, Shryock Auditorium, 26 April 2004.

points are between different communities of hip hop, and how contemporary society looks at hip hop, not how to sell more records. Young hip-hop artists are looking for ways to sell records and make money. By the time they have earned enough money<sup>14</sup> or have found that they are being used by the industry,<sup>15</sup> many rap stars refocus their efforts on making hip hop a positive force for its community.

The novelty of hip hop as an academic pursuit can be viewed both positively and negatively. There are a host of sources on this topic, but many of these sources come from an insider's perspective. It is not uncommon to find statements such as, "I grew up in a world..."<sup>16</sup> or "the plot *we're* living right now..."<sup>17</sup> from academic sources on hip hop. While it is important to recognize that some members of the academic community who are writing about hip hop culture are part of this culture, it would be completely unfair to this field to hold reservations about these individuals' objectivity when dealing with the subject, just as it would be ludicrous to deny the significance of Todd Gitlin's personal narrative to a discussion of the 1960s, or to hold reservations about Elie Wiesel's ability to effectively examine WWII. Secondly, it would be absurd to consider the cultural background of every author who is considered as a source in this project. Academic authors such as Nelson George, Robin Kelley, and Michael Eric Dyson may be informed by personal association or identification with the hip hop community, yet this fact is openly addressed by these authors. Other authors on hip hop might have

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<sup>14</sup> Ice-T talked about his experiences related to his heavy metal band Body Count. He released a song entitled *Cop Killer* that started a media frenzy that ultimately resulted in President Bush making a statement to television in which, as Ice-T stated, he said Ice-T's name in anger. Ice-T said he found it very disconcerting that the next day and for two weeks after this there was an "ice cream" truck parked outside his home in the middle of winter. Ice-T went on to say the President's speech helped record sales, but after he made enough money to be secure he picked his projects more judiciously. Ice-T: Spoken Word Tour, Shryock Auditorium, 22 February, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Chuck D.

<sup>16</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Emphasis added, Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Viking Publishing, 1998), 1.

similar insider positions yet feel the need to distance themselves from this associate specifically because of the fear of questions of objectivity.

Some of the most active and significant critics and theoreticians of hip-hop culture are distinguished members of the community. Rappers such as Chuck D (frontman/MC of the rap group Public Enemy), KRS-One (frontman/MC of the group Boogie Down Productions, and Ice-T have come from the urban environs that spawned hip hop, become legendary within the hip hop community for their skills as MCs, and found financial success in doing so. All of these artists have chosen to use their positions as hip-hop stars to critique the dominant culture as well as the culture they represent. In these cases there is no question that they are working as primary sources. However, there is no scale to determine how hip hop an individual is. The hip-hop culture's focus on being "fresh" allows for continual expansion of hip hop's boundaries.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, to say Chuck D is a more accurate embodiment of hip hop culture than Dyson simply because the former was a rapper and the latter is a professor is problematic for **academic** purposes.<sup>19</sup> However, for the image-driven hip hop youth, Chuck D's is more authentic because you can buy his albums and see his videos. Yet, many younger fans of hip hop might find Nelly or 50 Cent even more authentic. There is no hip-hop review board. The diversity within hip hop has allowed for its longevity. This diversity and continual invention and innovation within hip hop has allowed for the culture's exponential growth.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the same amorphousness that has fueled the growth of hip hop has resulted in ardent attacks on the

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<sup>18</sup> George, *Hip Hop America*, XVII-XVIII.

<sup>19</sup> The expansion of hip hop into mainstream society has changed the way hip hop culture can be represented. Before hip hop's crossover success into the dominate culture, hip hop was related to the culture of the urban centers. In today's world, hip hop still represents the culture of the urban centers, but an individual does not need to speak, act, or look hip hop at all times to be a member of the culture.

<sup>20</sup> Articles from jstor on hip hop in other nations.

culture.

Uninformed outsiders to the hip hop community have used marginal issues within hip hop as representative of the whole. Starting with the violence associated with the gang members who were the earliest audience, and often time creators<sup>21</sup> of hip hop, mainstream society sees what it wants to see in this subculture. The devastating effects of the crack cocaine epidemic since the 1980s plagued the communities from which rap stars were born and where its audience resided. Some of these marginal issues have come to define hip hop. The misogynistic and violent nature of “gangsta rap” became **the** lens through which outsiders viewed hip hop (particularly rap music) during the early 1990s.<sup>22</sup> The East Coast/West Coast rivalries that resulted in the deaths of hip-hop superstars Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur have greatly overshadowed all positive images of the hip hop community in the mass media during the mid and late 1990s.<sup>23</sup> And most recently, Eminem’s meteoric rise to the top of hip hop and popular music charts has brought a second wave of discussions of misogyny within hip hop as well as claims of rampant homophobia throughout the rap industry. Whether or not these controversies were appropriate challenges to hip hop, they helped this culture grow from being one community to becoming a world-wide movement.

The influences of hip hop come in a variety of forms. From the storytelling tradition of the griots<sup>24</sup> of West Africa, to the poetry of Langston Hughes,<sup>25</sup> to the urban decay of

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<sup>21</sup> Afrika Bambaataa was one of the first popular DJs and had formerly been a member of the Black Spades in the Bronx, NY. Bambaataa defused potentially violent interactions between gang members by having rival gangs compete against each other in break-dance, DJ, and rap competitions, George 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ronin Ro, *Gangsta: Merchandizing the Rhymes of Violence* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Joy Bennett Kinnon, “Does a Rap Have a Future?,” *Ebony* 52, no. 8 (1997): 76-77.

<sup>24</sup> Griots are a part of West African musical tradition as storytellers who discuss culture through song, Catherine Lavender, American Frontiers and Borderlands on-line website, City University of New York, <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/griotimages.html> (accessed 21 April 2005).

1970s inner cities, to the music traditions of Jamaica DJs<sup>26</sup>, hip hop has been shaped by disparate forces. Due to the variety of players and the culture's reverence for "freshness," analyzing early hip-hop culture requires historians to use oral histories and collective memories. While there are undoubtedly individual challengers to the narrative, the majority of all sources have come to share the base line of the story of hip hop.

The elements of hip hop developed at different times, but came together during the mid 1970s in South Bronx, New York. Graffiti has been around since it adorned cave walls.<sup>27</sup> Eventually it found its way onto subway cars and into decaying inner-city slums as a way to mark territory, and, in some people's eyes, decorate the barren urban landscape. Forms of urban dance had always existed, but the specific style of "break-dancing" was created to match the break-beats<sup>28</sup> of early hip hop music. Jamaican immigrant Clive Campbell (DJ Kool Herc) is credited with being one of the first DJs to bring the Jamaican tradition of "toasting" to the New York clubs.<sup>29</sup> Herc added an emphasis on replaying the break-beat or the "hook" of song repeatedly by using two turntables to excite the crowd at dance clubs.<sup>30</sup> He is also credited with coining the term "b-boy," which generally refers to a break-dancer or someone who enjoys the break-

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<sup>25</sup> During the opening of each Def Poetry episode a writing selection is read by the MC, Mos Def, to spotlight historical writers that have laid the foundation for modern hip hop culture. The very first Def Poetry Jam's opening was a poem by Langston Hughes entitled "Harlem Sweeties." It has become a type of trademark by Def Poetry to have Mos Def end the opening by giving the name of the author of the poem and identifying the author as a Def Poet, *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry: Episode 1*, Home Box Office Inc., 2005.

<sup>26</sup> DJ Kool Herc is identified as one of the earliest DJs to introduce hip hop music. Herc's musical style was greatly informed by the musical traditions of his birthplace, Jamaica. "Toasting" was a tradition among Jamaican DJs as a way to talk to the crowd at a party over the music being provided by the records. Boasting about one's musical talents was a common theme among the Jamaican DJs during their toasts, a tradition that is said to have been brought to hip hop music by Herc which has been a staple of hip hop music throughout its existence, Steve Jones, "Reggae's Dancehall Style Hits Mainland," *USA Today*, 26 August 2002, Life (D4).

<sup>27</sup> George, *Fresh Hip Hop Don't Stop*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> The break-beat refers to the rhythmic portion of a musical passage that provides a hook to grab listeners, attention. Break-beats are often only five to fifteen seconds long, but DJs "loop," or repeat this portion of a song repeatedly to provide a catchy background rhythm over which other sounds and lyrics are laid to create a song. Rap artists have often been chided for taking the best portions of other songs and incorporating them into a new song, or sampling. The sampled portion is most commonly the break-beat.

<sup>29</sup> Lommel, 20; George, *Hip Hop America*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Nelson George discusses the evolution of the Jamaican toasting to DJs regularly adding lyrics over the music they are playing, which came to be known as rapping. The earliest rappers were the DJs, a trend that has long passed, *Fresh Hip Hop Don't Stop*, 4.

beats.<sup>31</sup> From the mid 1970s until 1979 several other innovations occurred in DJing. A toggle switch was added to the double turntable by early pioneering DJ Grandmaster Flash (Joseph Sadler), which allowed a single turntable to provide all the sounds necessary for mixing.<sup>32</sup> Flash also discovered that he could manipulate the speed of the record, even stopping and playing a small segment of the record backward.<sup>33</sup> This technique became known as scratching. The final innovation that came before rap music broke out of the ghettos and onto radio stations was the usage of an electronic drum machine called the beat box. Afrika Bambaataa (Kevin Donovan) is given credit for popularizing the beat box to create textured percussion sounds.<sup>34</sup>

As these new techniques built on each other, DJs had to spend more time focusing on the creation of sound and had less time to “toast” the crowds.<sup>35</sup> By the end of the 1970s duos and groups became the norm of the hip-hop music world. The DJ would match his talents with an MC or several MCs to create what became rap music. The MCs continual barrage of rhymed phrases to the beat of the music became known as rapping. Some of the pioneering rap groups were Run-DMC, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious

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<sup>31</sup> DJ Kool Herc looked beyond the traditional recordings of Black urban America to find break-beats. The ability of a DJ to find new songs to sample break-beats from was vital to their popularity. Herc valued the albums he sampled so much that he would soak the record label off of the album that he used to DJ so that other DJs could not figure out what albums were being used to create the music, George, 6.

<sup>32</sup> The toggle switch allowed DJs to play two different records at once and switch back and forth between the two to create textures using only one turntable. It also allowed a DJ to play one record and find the next song that was to be played or sampled by listening through headphones so the music would be continually playing, George, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Grandmaster Flash’s protégé Grand Wizard Theodore is said to have accidentally discovered the technique of stopping a record with his hand so he could hear his mother talking to him as he was practicing DJing, but Flash is given credit for mastering the technique and bringing it to the wider hip hop audience, Henderson, 3; George, *Hip Hop America*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> As part of Bambaataa’s effort to be a positive force through music he began focusing on Black Nationalism, converted to Islam, and changed his name. Bambaataa also founded an organization called the Zulu Nation to try to help inner-city youth avoid the problems of gang-warfare, Henderson, 31; George, *Hip Hop America*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Robin Kelley discusses the tradition of the “dozens” in Black America. The dozens is basically a school yard game where competitors use their verbal skills to insult each other. Kelley suggests that the dozens has carried over from the playgrounds to the rap industry as a way to verbally “dis” (disrespect) competing rappers, Robin Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997): 1-2.

Five, Treacherous Three, and Eric B. & Rakim.<sup>36</sup> The Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (1979) was the first commercially successful rap recording.<sup>37</sup> Kurtis Blow's "Christmas Rappin'" followed in 1980.<sup>38</sup> The upbeat tempo and jovial tone of these crossover singles presented rap music to the public with sounds more akin to disco than modern hip hop. The first commercial hit that spoke directly about the conditions in the ghettos was Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Fives' "The Message" (1982).<sup>39</sup> The group also recorded a video for the song which features the group's front man, Melle Mel, rapping in the streets of the South Bronx about the urban pressures of living in what looks to be a war-torn environment. Melle Mel captures the daily conflicts of many inner-city residents with his lyrics:

Broken glass everywhere People pissing on the stairs, you know they just  
 Don't care I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise Got no money to move out,  
 I guess I got no choice rats in the front room, roaches in the back  
 Junkie's in the alley with a baseball bat I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far Cause  
 the man with the tow-truck repossessed my car  
 Chorus: Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge I'm trying not to loose my head  
 It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder How I keep from going under  
 Standing on the front stoop, hangin' out the window Watching all the cars go by,  
 roaring as the breezes Blow Crazy lady, livin' in a bag Eating out of garbage piles,  
 used to be a fag-hag search and test a tango, skips the life and then go to search a prince  
 to see the last of senses down at the peepshow, watching all the creeps  
 So she can tell the stories to the girls back home She went to the city and got so ditty  
 She had to get a pimp, she couldn't make it on her own  
 Chorus: It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder How I keep from goin' under  
 My brother's doing fast on my mother's t.v. Says she watches to much, is just not healthy  
 All my children in the daytime, dallas at night Can't even see the game or the sugar ray  
 fight  
 Bill collectors they ring my phone And scare my wife when I'm not home Got a bum  
 education, double-digit inflation  
 Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike At the station Me on king kong standin' on  
 my back  
 Can't stop to turn around, broke my sacroiliac Midrange, migraine, cancered membrane  
 Sometimes I think I'm going insane,  
 I swear I might Hijack a plane! My son said daddy I don't wanna go to school Cause the  
 teacher's a jerk, he must think I'm a fool And all the kids smoke reefer, I think it'd be  
 cheaper If I just got a job, learned to be a street sweeper dance to the beat,

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<sup>36</sup> Chuck D lists what he sees as the most important rap duos and groups, Chuck D, 28.

<sup>37</sup> George, *Fresh Hip Hop Don't Stop*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Lommel, 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

shuffle my feet Wear a shirt and tie and run with the creeps Cause it's all about money,  
 ain't a damn thing funny  
 You got to have a con in this land of milk and honey They push that girl in front of a  
 train Took her to a doctor,  
 sowed the arm on again Stabbed that man, right in his heart Gave him a transplant before  
 a brand new start  
 I can't walk through the park, cause it's crazy after the dark Keep my hand on the gun,  
 cause they got me on the run  
 I feel like an outlaw, broke my last fast jaw Hear them say you want some more, livin' on  
 a seesaw a child was born, with no state of mind Blind to the ways of mankind God is  
 smiling on you but he's frowning too  
 Cause only God knows what you go through You grow in the ghetto, living second rate  
 And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate The places you play and where you stay  
 Looks like one great big alley way You'll admire all the number book takers  
 Thugs, pimps, pushers and the big money makers Driving big cars, spending twenties and  
 tens And you wanna grow up to be just like them Smugglers, scrambles, burglars,  
 gamblers Pickpockets, peddlers and even pan-handlers  
 You say I'm cool, I'm no fool But then you wind up dropping out of high school Now  
 you're unemployed, all null 'n' void Walking around like you're pretty boy floyd Turned  
 stickup kid, look what you done did got send up for a eight year bid Now your man is  
 took and you're a maytag Spend the next two years as an undercover fag  
 Being used and abused, and served like hell Till one day you was find hung dead in a cell  
 It was plain to see that your life was lost You was cold and your body swung back and  
 forth  
 But now your eyes sing the sad sad song Of how you lived so fast and died so young<sup>40</sup>

Hip hop did have something to say and would continue to reflect the lives of the artists and audience. “The Message” united urban Black America as a hip-hop community because it reflected what many people dealt with day to day and how they felt. It also allowed people, unfamiliar with the conditions of urban ghettos, to hear first-person accounts of what it was like to live in that environment. Hip hop had the ability to bridge cultural gaps and make outsiders to the community empathize with urban Black America. However, hip hop’s past and near-future would be based in entertainment and escape.

The evolution of hip-hop music from DJs in clubs toasting to mixing on turntables to rapping by MCs with DJ accompaniment within the first decade of hip hop’s musical existence foretold the rapid changes that would shape the hip-hop music and culture as a whole. As these first radio hits widened the audience, the music industry took note and the entrepreneurial spirit of hip hop was formed. One of the first to recognize the

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<sup>40</sup> Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “The Message,” *The Message* (Sugarhill Records), 1981.

financial value of this new music was Russell “Rush” Simmons. Rush grew up in (Hollis) Queens, New York and graduated high school in 1975 during the early days of hip-hop musical culture. His proximity to the new youth culture of hip hop fed his pre-existing interest in music. In 1977, Simmons saw MC Eddie Cheeba perform at the Charles Gallery in Harlem and witnessed people crowding into the venue. The excitement of this one show fueled Simmons to consider the financial opportunities that existed as a party organizer.<sup>41</sup> Soon Simmons was managing performers under the name Rush Management. Kurtis Blow was Rush’s first MC. Blow’s DJ ended up being Russell’s thirteen-year-old brother Joey<sup>42</sup> Run did not stay behind the turntable for long. He soon started rapping with childhood friend Darryl McDaniels (DMC). While polishing their rapping style they added Jason Mizell (Jam Master J) as DJ and formed Run-DMC under Rush Management.

During this same period of time a white Jewish kid from Long Island, Rick Rubin, produced an album with DJ Jazzy Jay that sold 90,000 copies.<sup>43</sup> Rubin named his label Def Jam Records and included his New York University dorm room number on the logo. He soon met Russell Simmons, whose Rush Management now carried Run-DMC, Kurtis Blow and several other rap and R&B artists. Russell’s energetic personality and promoting ability were a perfect match for Rubin’s dedication to making music in the studio and finding talent. Shortly after Rubin and Simmons joined forces Rubin was filtering through the hundreds of tapes that had been dropped off at his dorm since DJ Jazzy Jay’s record had been released. This new pool of talent resulted in Rubin’s

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<sup>41</sup> *Journeys in Black: Russell Simmons*, Black Biography Productions, DVD, 2002; Lommel, 29-30.

<sup>42</sup> Joey Simmons soon took the stage name “Run,” based on his constant “running of his mouth,” *Journeys in Black*.

<sup>43</sup> Rubin produced the records that were printed and distributed by a small record company, Streetwise/Partytime Records, *Journeys in Black*.

discovery of Lady's Love Cool Jay (LL Cool J). Def Jam chose to produce its first totally independent record in November 1984 with LL Cool J's "I Need a Beat," which sold 100,000 units.<sup>44</sup> The Beastie Boys were the next to sign and release a series of successful records for Def Jam/Rush Management.<sup>45</sup> These new artists, added to the collection of (historically less known) artists who had already been selling records, resulted in Def Jam having seven different releases selling 250,000 or more copies. In light of Def Jam/Rush Management's success as a completely independent label, CBS's new "hip hop division" offered to buy the rights to simply distribute Def Jam releases without any creative control over Simmons and Rubin.<sup>46</sup>

Up to this point in hip hop history very few fans came from outside the urban communities that spawned the majority of the artists. The Beastie Boys were the first recognizable white rappers. They mixed a punk-rock sound with hip-hop beats and style to create a very new and different form of hip hop. Rick Rubin continued to push the boundaries of hip hop by suggesting to Run-DMC that they cover the 1970s Aerosmith spoken-word single "Walk this Way" for their upcoming, *Raising Hell*, album. This became one of the most influential moments in hip hop history, if not music history. Run-DMC was at the top of the hip-hop industry with fellow label mates The Beastie Boys. The rock/hip hop cover became a smash hit and reintroduced Aerosmith to the world. This cross-over hit reached number three on the pop single charts and became the bridge for a new hybrid of hip hop music.

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<sup>44</sup> Lommel, 35.

<sup>45</sup> The Beastie Boys consists of Adam Yauch (MCA), Adam Horowitz (AD-Rock), and Mike Diamond (Mike D). All three are from moderately affluent Jewish-American New York families. Originally The Beastie Boys played punk music, but had always been interested in hip hop and decided to focus more on it by the early-mid 1980s, "Beastie Boy," MTV.com, [http://www.mtv.com/bands/az/beastie\\_boys/bio.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/bands/az/beastie_boys/bio.jhtml) (accessed May 4, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> *Journeys in Black*.

Def Jam/Rush Management collected another star attraction during the mid 1980s. In 1986, after graduating from Adelphia University in Long Island, NY and finding a job processing film for a living, bored and tired, Carlton Ridenhour (Chuck D) turned his youthful pastime of DJing and rapping into a contract to create an album with Rick Rubin at Def Jam with his rap group Public Enemy.<sup>47</sup> As Rubin and Ridenhour were having unimaginable success, a financial dispute with The Beastie Boys resulted in their departure for another label. However, Public Enemy's *Yo! Bum Rush the Show* album was another relative success for Def Jam/Rush Management. Chuck D's booming voice and politically driven lyrics about the plight of black urban America would spawn a new generation of hip hop. Rubin's interest in expanding musical horizons with groups like Public Enemy came in conflict with Simmons' preference for R & B styled hip hop. Rubin's 1988 departure from Def Jam records freed Rubin to pursue projects from movie soundtracks to producing death-metal albums.<sup>48</sup> In 1990, Simmons renegotiated Def Jam/Rush Management's contract with CBS making Simmons an equal partner with CBS.<sup>49</sup>

By the late 1980s rap was making strong strides at crossover success. The rock-infused rap of Run-DMC (via "Walk this Way") and The Beastie Boys had become a hit with white audiences, while artists such as Eric B. and Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, LL Cool J, and Cool Moe D were continuing the dance friendly beat driven style of hip hop music that was descended from Afrika Bambaataa and Kurtis Blow. Greatly impacted by MTV's decision to create a show specifically designed to

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<sup>47</sup> "Public Enemy," MTV.com, [http://www.mtv.com/bands/az/public\\_enemy/bio.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/bands/az/public_enemy/bio.jhtml) (accessed May 4, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> *Journeys in Black*.

<sup>49</sup> Lommel, 38; *Journeys in Black*.

bring new crossover success, hip hop's first real visual introduction into white America came in the form of *Yo MTV Raps*.<sup>50</sup> Hip hop's influence continued to grow, now in visual arts, videos, and clothing. At the same time that rap was finding crossover popular success the next major shift in hip-hop history occurred.

Rap artists began to reflect the atmosphere that existed in the ghettos. Boogie Down Production's (BDP) 1987 release "9mm Goes Bang" is one of the first rap songs to address gun violence:

Me knew a crack dealer by the name of Peter  
 Had to buck him down with my 9 millimeter  
 He said I had his girl I said "Now what are you? Stupid?"  
 But he tried to play me out and KRS-One knew it  
 He reached for his pistol but it was just a waste  
 Cos my 9 millimeter was up against his face  
 He pulled his pistol anyway and I filled him full of lead  
 (Boogie Down Productions "9mm Goes Bang" Criminal Minded)

However, Boogie Down Production's MC, KRS-One (Kris Parker), is known for his positive attitude and messages. He had previously penned a song entitled "Stop the Violence" with fellow Boogie Down Production member Scott La Rock who subsequently died from a gunshot wound inflicted when he tried to break up a street fight.<sup>51</sup> After La Rock's death, KRS-One recorded a second album which included "Stop the Violence." After his hip-hop partner died, KRS-One's message became more important to the MC.<sup>52</sup>

BDP's violence laden *Criminal Minded* album hit at the same time as Public Enemy's *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*. However, Public Enemy was not trying to reflect

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<sup>50</sup> J. Malanowski, "Top Hip-Hop," *Rolling Stone* 556/557, 77-78; Greg Dimitriadis, "Hip Hop: From Live Performance to Mediated Narrative," *Popular Music* 15, no. 2 (1996): 188.

<sup>51</sup> Mos Def discusses how KRS-One has established himself as a positive force in the hip hop community as "the Teacher," and has continually been outspoken regarding ways for success for black urban audiences, *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry: Season 4*, Home Box Office Inc, 2005; KRS-One has also been honored for his work in the Stop the Violence campaign by the Billboard/American Urban Radio R&B/Hip Hop Award (2004), Rashuan Hall, "KRS-One Helped Create Hip-Hop Culture," *Billboard* 116, no. 32 (2004): R-4-5.

<sup>52</sup> In an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*, KRS-One reflected on refocusing his efforts on being a positive force for his listeners after Scott La Rock's death, A. Light, "Wisdom From the Street," *Rolling Stone* 605 (30 May 1991):

urban culture; they were trying to challenge it as well as mainstream America. Chuck D's bellowing voice rapped about crack cocaine's impact on the urban centers and was willing to attack any and all of the dominant culture:

Elvis was a hero to most  
 But he never meant shit to me you see  
 Straight up racist that sucker was  
 Simple and plain  
 Mother fuck him and John Wayne  
 Cause I'm Black and I'm proud  
 I'm ready and hyped plus I'm amped  
 Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps  
 Sample a look back you look and find  
 Nothing but rednecks for 400 years if you check <sup>53</sup>

Public Enemy also included a group of backup dancers dressed in Black Panther military style attire, S1W (Security of the First World), that “danced” while holding fake Uzis and performing martial arts style movements. DJ Terminator X, following in the musical footsteps of Jam Master J with harder edged background tracks, mixed in sirens and various urban noises to the already full sound of the group. Chuck D's allegiance with the Nation of Islam in addition to his voice, the lyrical content, and the look of the group provided a frightening image to many outsiders to hip hop and even some people who had come to accept the much more accessible dance tracks that were being played on MTV and popular radio.<sup>54</sup>

The most frightening form of hip hop to most people during this era was West Coast “gangsta rap.” Just as East Coast rappers could not be expected to write rhymes about the violence of the gangs of Southern California and Oakland, West Coast rappers had little in common with New York-based b-boy culture. The commonality was both parties' willingness to address what they saw as the biggest problems in their community. As

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<sup>53</sup> “Fight the Power,” PublicEnemy.com lyric search, <http://www.publicenemy.com> (accessed May 4, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> On the liner notes of Public Enemy records the traditional information such as lead singer, bassist, etc. is replaced with politically motivated titles akin to the Black Panther Party. Chuck D's title is lyrical assassin.

Public Enemy and BDP were writing about the exploitation of and self-destructive aspects of urban African-American society, rapper Eazy-E, a former drug-dealer, was trying to create his own record label (Ruthless Records) with a different focus.<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, Eazy-E teamed up with Dr. Dre (Andre Young), Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson), and DJ Yella (Antione Carraby) under the name N.W.A.<sup>56</sup> (Niggaz with Attitude) and released *N.W.A. and the Posse* in 1987.<sup>57</sup> N.W.A.'s second release, 1988s *Straight Outta Compton* (with the addition of MC Ren) became the band's ticket to stardom. Openly rapping, "Fuck the Police," and discussing the brutality of the Los Angeles Police Department, *Straight Outta Compton* struck a loud chord with gang members up and down the West Coast. This version of rap that openly discussed the violence in South Los Angeles related to gang-warfare and crack-laden streets came to be known as "gangsta rap."

Another source of gangsta rap came from Ice-T (Tracy Morrow). As a high school student in South Central Los Angeles' Crenshaw High with no familial role model<sup>58</sup>, Ice-T came to idealize the men of the streets who had lots of money and girls always around. Ice-T found community in the gangs of Crenshaw. One particular pimp that Ice-T identified with was Iceberg Slim.<sup>59</sup> Slim had been an urban hustler<sup>60</sup> who eventually went on to write poetry and novels about pimp life which Ice-T began memorizing. As Ice-T was idealizing pimp/hustler lifestyles and listening to early rap music he found himself an expectant parent. Realizing he needed to do something to assure financial

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<sup>55</sup> N.W.A., MTV.com, <http://www.mtv.com/bands/az/nwa/bio.jhtml> (accessed May 4, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ice-T's parents both died early in the rapper's life, Ice-T: Spoken Word Tour, Shryock Auditorium 22 February, 2002.

<sup>59</sup> All subsequent information on Ice-T was obtained from, Ice-T: Spoken Word Tour.

<sup>60</sup> The term "hustler" refers to someone who is resourceful and will do anything to make money, whether legal or illegal.

stability for his unborn child, Ice-T joined the military. Very little of Ice-T's military service is known other than what he has told audiences in his spoken word tours. His advice to potential volunteers, "Don't do it." After serving two years in the military and coming home with no any financial resources<sup>61</sup> and a child to support, he did **whatever** he could to make money. Teaming up with fellow gang members, one of his first "jobs" was robbing a bank. Robbing the homes of Palm Springs, California residents was also one of Ice-T's hustles. His military experience did come in handy, although surely not in the way Uncle Sam imaged it. By 1987, Ice-T, who had kept up with his musical talents, signed with a label and released his first album, appropriately titled *Rhyme Pays*. Ice-T has dedicated his life to financial success. Gangsta rap was an easy way to make money for the burgeoning crossover star. He wrote about his life as a hustler and pimp. He wrote rhymes in the vernacular of the streets in which he grew up and reflected a West Coast gang culture that was authentic to his audience. He no longer had to hustle in the streets; he found a new hustle.

As West Coast gangsta rap exploded onto the scene with Ice-T and N.W.A., the general public began to take notice of the violence centered around the rap industry. Gangsta rap did not preach to its audience about clean living and making good choices the way Public Enemy or BDP did, nor did it continue with the break-beat legacy of early hip-hop music. This new style of hip hop would continue to be authentic music for gang members and hustlers in the inner-cities. However, the hip-hop music scene was now part of American popular culture. MTV and popular radio became the vehicle for white America to accept hip-hop culture. Gangsta rap to Generation Xers was similar to what

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<sup>61</sup> Ice-T does not mention the exact situation that resulted in his returning home from the military. He does say that he had no money and only served two years. The assumption that can be made is he did not complete his service or was asked to leave the service due to the lack of financial resources when he returned home.

rock 'n roll was to early baby-boomers. It challenged the former generation's concept of the world around them and its values. The pundits', politicians', and parents' shouts deriding hip hop worked like a magnet for these people's youthful congregations, constituents, and children.

While the debates began taking place in the mass culture about the impact of such violent images, hip hop kept producing financially successful albums. N.W.A. had broken up by the early 1990s, but spawned a solo artist who would continue in gangsta rap's model. Dr. Dre polished his well-rounded skills as a DJ/producer and MC with his first solo project, *The Chronic*.<sup>62</sup> Dre would become a force in gangsta rap as the producer of records for a company that he founded with Suge Knight in 1992, Death Row Records. Other West Coast rappers signed and began producing albums for Death Row, including Snoop Dogg (Calvin Broadus) and Tupac Shakur. Knight's violent nature as a manager of artists and his continued interaction with the gang scene of South Los Angeles would eventually lead to Dre's departure from the label in 1996.

The other star of N.W.A. (and first to leave the band in 1989 over financial conflicts with management) was Ice Cube. Ice Cube, the most politically driven and gifted MC of the group, joined forces with Public Enemy's production team, The Bomb Squad, in New York with his new group, da Lench Mob.<sup>63</sup> Ice Cube's brand of gangsta rap was influenced by the raw sounds of the East Coast (i.e. Public Enemy) with a continued dedication to representing authentic West Coast rap. Ice Cube's music continued to be laced with misogynistic language and extremely violent imagery. This whole subgenre of rap music came under immense pressure from outside forces when members of the clergy

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<sup>62</sup> "The Chronic" refers to very high quality marijuana.

<sup>63</sup> N.W.A., MTV.com.

and politicians began to press the industry to clean up.

From notions that gangsta rap was directly (or indirectly) a cause of the Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King verdict to blaming the music for causing people to shoot police officers, gangsta rap has been cited for causing a variety of social ills.<sup>64</sup> As the media began to pay more and more attention to the political and social debates that were taking place in society, the popularity and record sales of gangsta rap artists also increased. Ice Cube became a crossover movie star by portraying the gangsta older brother in *Boyz in the Hood*. The movie effectively portrayed the senseless violence that has been associated with life in South Los Angeles. As the debate surrounding gangsta rap swirled, violence within the hip hop community forced the rap world to address the issue directly when in a six month period in 1996 and 1997 two of the most popular rappers were murdered.

The most infamous of all hip-hop violence are the murders of Christopher Wallace (Notorious B.I.G. or Biggie Smalls) and Tupac Shakur. The two, both from New York, had been friends until Shakur was ambushed in the lobby of a building that Small's posse coincidentally was at.<sup>65</sup> Shakur suffered five gunshot wounds and two other men with Shakur were uninjured. In the months that followed, Shakur was unable to obtain any information from Small's posse regarding who the assailants may have been. This, coupled with Small's rising stardom and unwillingness to help Shakur during his trial for rape, caused a great rift between the two.<sup>66</sup> Shakur suggested that Smalls used Shakur's rapping style to gain fame and then turned away from him when Tupac needed his

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<sup>64</sup> Greg Beets, "Trial Witness Ties Rap to Violent Act," *Billboard* 105, no. 28 (1993): 71-72.

<sup>65</sup> All subsequent information regarding this shooting is taken from an interview in which Tupac Shakur explains the series of events that led him to the situation where he was shot five times and the unwillingness of his former friends to look him in the eye or help him locate the assailants, Kevin Powell, "Ready to Live," *Vibe Magazine* 18 (1995).

<sup>66</sup> Editors of *Vibe Magazine*, "Inside the Mind of Shakur," *Vibe Magazine* 32.

friendship.<sup>67</sup> By 1996, Shakur distanced himself from his former East Coast friends and signed with Death Row Records.<sup>68</sup> Shakur was shot and killed in Las Vegas later that year after attending a Mike Tyson fight. Less than six months later Smalls was shot and killed in his car outside a nightclub in Los Angeles.<sup>69</sup>

The death of these two superstars of hip hop had resounding effects on the entire community. No arrests have been made in the killings. Several books and documentaries have been made regarding the events surrounding the murders. Virtually no one with any interest in hip hop music believes that the killings are random or unrelated. Yet eight years after the events no strong leads exist, and the hip hop community regards the rappers' race and style of musical presentation as a direct link to this fact. The competition that existed between East Coast and West Coast rappers has become unacceptable for most within the industry. True fans of hip hop have no interest in the violence that such rivalries have brought (whether directly or indirectly). The popularity of gangsta rap has declined, but the overall tone of rap music continues to be about boasting. In the early years of rap, boasting was about a performer's talent in putting rhymes together and sounding good. In modern hip hop music it is not enough just to sound good; rappers have to be able to out earn competitors.

Yet a contradiction still exists within hip-hop culture. As a result of gangsta rap, a large segment of hip-hop fans identify strong masculine images with hip hop. Somewhere along the line rappers who were not embodying gangsta style and lyrics were looked at as outsiders trying to prove themselves in the industry. Granted, rappers such as Vanilla Ice,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Shakur states that Suge Knight, CEO of Death Row Records, was very generous financially and was willing to help with Shakur's legal problems regardless of whether he signed with Death Row, "In His Own Words," Interview with Tupac Shakur for KMEL Radio, as sited on Tupacfans.com, <http://www.tupacfans.com/words.php> (accessed May 9, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> Steve Dougherty and Jeff Schnaufer, "A Sad Refrain," *People* 47, no. 11 (1996): 69-70.

beyond his race, were looked down upon for their soft image as well as their limited skills. Popular culture trends greatly impact how a rapper will be received. MC Lyte was one of the first successful female rappers. Lyte found success as a hard-edged female rapper openly accepting the challenge of the misogynistic male culture around rap. Yet, when the bottom fell out on gangsta rap, her success plummeted as the trend of hard edge changed.<sup>70</sup> The way around this might be to simply wait for the trend to come back around.

The biggest story surrounding hip-hop culture over the last five years has been the emergence of the first white solo rap superstar. While The Beastie Boys found success on the fringes of hip hop and expanded the genre, Eminem tried the direct route and scored big. Eminem (Marshall Mathers) was “discovered” by former N.W.A. member Dr. Dre at a rap competition. Dr. Dre was struck by Eminem’s verbal skills.<sup>71</sup> He was also intrigued that these lyrics were coming from a white rapper. Dr. Dre signed Eminem to a record deal and produced his first album, *Slim Shady*. Eminem quickly became a superstar after the release of his first single “My Name Is.” This single was a very lighthearted song that poked fun at many aspects of popular culture with a very catchy popular music/top forty sound (versus hip hop). This would be the last instance in which Eminem would be looked at as simply a funny rapper. Much of the remainder of the album was laced with extremely violent images that made Dr. Dre’s early music sound tame. While the debate began to rage about Eminem’s woman-bashing, gay-bashing, and explicitly violent content, his record sales soared.

Eminem wanted to be an authentic member of the hip hop community. He

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<sup>70</sup> Mc Lyte, “I Was Born,” *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry: Season 2*, Home Box Office Inc., 2004.

<sup>71</sup> “The Marshall Mathers LP”, VH1’s Ultimate Albums, television program.

represented himself by using his music to exorcise all of his past demons, including writing passages about killing the mother of his child. He represented the community from which he came, a predominantly black section of Detroit. He was also quick to thank Dr. Dre, and after winning the 2003 Grammy Award for Best Rap Album (The Eminem Show) he chose to say thank you to a who's who list of hip hop's most important MCs. Eminem has been vilified by gay and women's rights organizations for his lyrics.<sup>72</sup> Yet, Eminem neither attacks back nor apologizes for his lyrical content. He simply keeps making and selling records. He also states that he is not homophobic, and as an act of contrition he performed with Elton John at the 2001 Grammy Award show as protesters marched and chanted outside. The odd thing about Eminem's situation is that homophobic, misogynistic, and violent lyrical content is not new. Hip-hop music has been inundated with this type of imagery for at least half of its existence. So, is it that Eminem is just selling more albums, which has made human rights groups more aware of the problem, or is it that he is a blonde haired, blue eyed misogynistic homophobe (in the eyes of some) that makes the difference. According to Eminem it is the latter:

(Prelude) America! We love you! How many people are proud to be citizens of this beautiful country of ours? The stripes and the stars for the rights that men have died for to protect / The women and men who have broke their necks for the freedom of speech the United States government has sworn to uphold. (Yo I want everybody to listen to the words of this song) or so we're told... I never would've dreamed in a million years I'd see, so many motherfuckin' people who feel like me/who share the same views and the same exact beliefs, it's like a fuckin' army marchin' in back of me/So many lives I touch, so much anger aimed in no particular direction, just sprays and sprays and straight through your radio waves it plays and plays, till it stays stuck in your head for days and days/who woulda thought, standing in this mirror bleachin' my hair, with some peroxide, reachin for a t-shirt to wear/that I would catapult to the forefront of rap like this? How could I predict my words would have an impact like this/I must've struck a chord, with somebody up in the office, cuz Congress keeps telling me I ain't causin' nuthin' but problems/and now they're sayin' I'm in trouble with the government, I'm lovin' it, I shoveled shit all my life/and now I'm dumping it on... White America! I could be one of your kids White America! Little Eric looks just like this White America! Erica loves my shit! go to TRL, look how many hugs I get Look at these eyes, baby blue, baby just like yourself, if they

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<sup>72</sup> Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association on-line website, [http://www.galha.org/press/2001/02\\_23.html](http://www.galha.org/press/2001/02_23.html); National Organization for Women on-line website <http://www.now.org/press/02-01/02-05-01.html> (accessed May 9, 2005).

were brown Shady lose, Shady sits on the shelf/but Shady's cute, Shady knew Shady's dimples would help, make ladies swoon baby, ooh baby! Look at my sales/Lets do the math, If I was black I would've sold half, I ain't have to graduate from Lincoln High School to know that/but I could rap, so fuck school, I'm too cool to go back, gimme the mic, show me where the fuckin' studio's at/When I was underground, no one gave a fuck I was white, no labels wanted to sign me almost gave up, I was like/Fuck it, until I met Dre, the only one to look past, gave me a chance, and I lit a fire up under his ass/helped him get back to the top, every fan black that I got was probably his in exchange for every white fan that he's got/Like damn, we just swapped. Sittin' back lookin' at shit, wow, I'm like my skin is it starting to work to my benefit now? See the problem is I speak to suburban kids who otherwise would of never knew these words exist/whose moms probably woulda never gave two squirts of piss, till I created so much motherfuckin' turbulence/straight out the tube, right into your living room I came, and kids flipped when they knew I was produced by Dre/That's all it took, and they were instantly hooked right in, and they connected with me too because I looked like them/that's why they put my lyrics up under this microscope, searchin' with a fine tooth comb, its like this rope/waitin' to choke, tightening around my throat, watching me while I write this, like I don't like this (Nope)/All I hear is: lyrics, lyrics, constant controversy, sponsors working round the clock, to try to stop my concerts early/surely hip hop was never a problem in Harlem only in Boston, after it bothered the fathers of daughters starting to blossom/so now I'm catchin' the flack from these activists when they raggin', actin' like I'm the first rapper to smack a bitch, or say faggot/shit, just look at me like I'm your closest pal, the posterchild, the mother fuckin' spokesman now for... So to the parents of America / I am the derringer aimed at little Erica, to attack her character / The ringleader of this circus of worthless pawns / Sent to lead the march right up to the steps of Congress / And piss on the lawns of the White House and replace it with a Parental Advisory sticker / To spit liquor in the faces of in this democracy of hypocrisy / Fuck you Ms. Cheney! Fuck you Tipper Gore! Fuck you with the freest of speech this divided states of embarrassment will allow me to have, Fuck you! I'm just kiddin' America, you know I love you.<sup>73</sup>

Regardless of what a rapper has to say, hip hop fans are at the mercy of the industry.

The original hip hop music stars were innovators in musical technology. They broke musical tradition and created a new music out of disco, R & B, soul, funk, and the traditions of African-American culture. These innovators were artists who looked to music to provide entertainment to distract them and their communities away from the horrible conditions of the urban ghettos. Hip hop existed in a virtual vacuum from the early 1970s until 1979 when Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* hit the radio waves. Once there became a market for this music many things changed. Capitalism took hold. In a positive sense, hip-hop culture reflected the tragic conditions of the urban America to

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<sup>73</sup> Eminem, "White America," *The Eminem Show (Aftermath/Interscope, 2002)*.

the dominant culture. It presented some of the most important problems with society to anyone that was listening. In a negative sense, capitalism changed the art form. It was no longer simply about entertainment. Hip hop began to be about sales and image. Rappers were no longer respected for having something important to say or for entertaining people at parties. It became a question of which artists could sell. Simple math shows that if the majority of the people of this country are white, then it is important to try and sell to this market.

As the impact of hip hop (as an industry) began to take hold, the music began to spread to a wider cultural audience. MTV was certainly one of the most important disseminators of hip-hop culture. The crosspollination of “freshness” in hip hop and the youth base of MTV connected to make hip-hop culture part of the learning processor for children growing up in the 1980s (and thereafter). This evolution, coupled with the emergence of the gangsta rap media spotlight forced many parents to pay attention to what their children were listening to. As adults started attacking hip hop as solely a violence- based form of music, it attracted the interest of their children. Yet, the angrier reactionary America got about this subgenre of hip hop, the more media attention was focused on it and the more records N.W.A., Ice-T, and 2Live Crew sold. The attention paid to gangsta rap has occupied far too much of the discussion of hip-hop culture. During this same period of time, hip-hop groups such as Tribe Called Quest<sup>74</sup> and Arrested Development<sup>75</sup> went unnoticed by parents and the groups virtually disbanded. Hip hop is not going away, but often times the music that does not make the news does.

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<sup>74</sup> Tribe Called Quest is a New York based rap group that intentionally focused on being positive and rarely, if ever, used profanity, derogatory references, or discussed violence.

<sup>75</sup> Arrested Development is a group dedicated to providing a positive message such as their song “People Everyday” is a song about trying to deal peacefully with a violent world.

Hip hop is a youth culture. It changes often. Not all of hip hop is positive. However, what subculture is completely positive? The comparisons between hip hop and rock 'n roll are striking. Was there really a problem with children going to an integrated concert, where black and white children were dancing together? Talking about hip hop requires dealing with unfamiliar and often politically controversial topics. Talking about controversial issues such as gang violence is important to understanding the society as a whole. I would not want my children listening to N.W.A. without my involvement. I **would** like to talk about the issues that N.W.A. raises in their music though. Another problem with the dominate culture's impression of hip-hop culture is its unwillingness to pay attention until a "problem" arises. Public Enemy was rapping about black people getting off all drugs, working for the betterment of their community, and challenging others in the hip-hop community to do the same. Yet, Public Enemy was lumped into the broad definition of gangsta rap by the media and politicians. Appearances are often deceiving, and Chuck D is trying to sound scary. There is a method to some of the madness.

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