

## **Rap: A Language of Life Through Words**

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Rap and hip hop music is the most freeing form of musical expression for young African Americans in terms of its ability to vocalize internal feelings of loss, love, and the struggles of life in an audibly interesting and socially relatable medium. This vocalization is made possible because of new technologies introduced at the time of rap's inception, as well as an increasing drive to pull inspiration from other artists through sampling. Additionally, rap is one of the most approachable genres of music for young aspiring musicians due to its relatively low financial cost of entry as well as the high proclivity for consuming rap and hip hop in today's music market makes the genre even more of an ideal option for young artists, in particular young African American artists, to jump in and begin producing music and expressing their cultural and societal perspective to an increasingly large and accessible audiences that can relate to the stories being told. I intend to show this by examining the life and music of local Norman artist Brien Dawn, otherwise known by his stage name: Juice the Hero. Specifically, I will analyze Brien's life growing up in the Dallas metroplex, his entry into the world of hip hop and rap music, and his current musical productions. I will also explore the various musical and lyrical aspects of a few of his releases to make connections between how rap serves as an outlet for young artists to freely express personal emotional struggles of everyday life growing up as a minority in America, how rap allows one to establish a unique identity by pulling on influences from other artists in the rap and hip hop scene, and telling communal stories through rap that are aimed at connecting with an ever growing audience.

Before examining Brien's music and its relation to the genre it is important to understand the history behind the genre itself. Rap music and hip hop culture first arose in the 1970s in the minority neighborhoods of New York City. The rise of rap music can largely be attributed to the post-industrial collapse of the South Bronx in New York after the installation of the Cross Bronx Freeway. This overpass, while extremely convenient for interstate travelers, heavily disrupted the neighborhoods that surrounded it, and caused a large majority of those that lived there during the time of the overpass' construction to flee to other areas, mostly south to New Jersey. In its wake, the Cross Bronx Expressway left those that were too poor to move away (which were largely African Americans and immigrants from various countries) in a societal climate that was stripped of its resources and political power. The close quarter, multicultural living spaces of these newly created "projects" combined with the ever advancing technologies in a post-industrial society produced the ideal breeding ground for new and innovative artistic expressions. And thus, the hip hop subculture was born (Rose 31-33).

Rap, the music associated with hip hop, quickly arose as a means of artistic expression. According to Tricia Rose, a professor of African Studies at Brown University and author of the analytical novel *Black Noise*, rap served as a means of expressing the difficulties and prejudices faced by those who lived in the New York projects by highlighting the key elements of location and identity (Rose 10). These two major thematic elements come across in terms of pride in an artist's home juxtaposed with the need to inform audiences of the harsh conditions faced by those that live there, as well as a need to set themselves apart from the crowd by establishing a unique identity.

For example, the idea of location playing a major role in rap music can clearly be heard in Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message", as well as its associated music video. In this song, Grandmaster Flash raps about the hardships faced by various members of his neighborhood. In particular, he talks about the unfortunate trend of young kids who grow up in the ghettos of New York dropping out of school to pursue the seemingly more financially beneficial trade of selling drugs, which then inevitably leads to winding up in jail. This transition from being an innocent kid to ending up in prison is a lamentable tendency in these neglected communities that would otherwise go unnoticed or ignored if rappers did not bring these issues to light. Ethnomusicologist Cheryl Keyes from the University of California, Los Angeles shed further light on the themes laid out by Rose in her article "At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus" by compiling research conducted by various scholars that revealed that "rap music expresses the everyday harsh realities of ghetto life and socio-political sentiments ranging from poverty, police brutality, and racial genocide to class and gender relations by an urban black youth constituency." (Keyes 224) "The Message" is an excellent showcase of this research.

The second major theme that Rose discusses that is seen throughout the hip hop world is that of establishing a unique identity. This is particularly clear when looking at the pseudonyms that rap artists take on. Names ranging from early rappers such as the aforementioned Grandmaster Flash and DJ Kool Herc to modern day hip hop artists such as Beyonce and Chance the Rapper all evoke a certain sense of notoriety and purpose when their names are heard that may otherwise not be as recognizable without these aliases. Assuming a name and naming entities, or *nommo*, is an African practice that has very clearly been carried over, whether directly or indirectly, to modern day music practices. These modern ways of employing the

practice of *nommo* are used to not only assume a different identity, but also to promote a particular image and ideology associated with that particular artist. It helps separate them from the mainstream and establish their own brand.

Now that I have established a brief history of rap and hip hop music and the major themes of rap music have been discussed, I will analyse a particular artist and how their life growing up in OKC and their introduction into the hip hop world has allowed them to express the tumultuous emotions experienced by themselves and most young Americans growing up at this time go through.

Brien Dawn, otherwise known as Juice the Hero, is a senior electrical engineering major at the University of Oklahoma, Norman. While by day many students at OU know Brien for his bright and bubbly personality and highly charismatic nature, by night this African american student is known for his rap and hip hop releases and live open-mic performances. However, before analyzing Brien's music, it will help to understand his personal history with the genre, his experiences growing up as an African American in modern day society, and his introduction into music production.

Brien credits his introduction into music to when he first picked up a viola 10 years ago. From that point on, he knew that music was something he wanted to be a major part of his life. Although he had been listening to music for as long as he can remember, it was the musical creativity that playing an instrument allowed that pushed him over the edge. His introduction into rap music itself came about due to his love of the genre, and in particular the Canadian artist Drake who at the time Brien started listening to was just starting to come on to the music scene as a major artist. The beats laid down by Drake in his lesser known first release *Room for*

*Improvement* in 2006 influenced him so much that he decided to use one of the songs from that album as inspiration for his own first release. In fact, Drake played such a major role in influencing Brien's introduction into rap music as a whole that, according to him, "I think I would have always become a musical artist, but I don't think I would be the type of artist I am if I hadn't listened to Drake as a kid."

In addition to being inspired by musical artists, Brien's life growing up in the Dallas metroplex also influenced his musical style and the narratives that compose his songs. Like many rap and hip hop artists, Brien draws on his own life experiences when coming up with the lyrics for his songs. Besides being the place where he was first introduced to creating music, his experiences in his Dallas based high school drove him to find a creative outlet. The culmination of his high school days, his dive into learning the viola, and his love of hip hop and rap music eventually gave him the idea to become a hip hop artist as a means of telling his personal story in hopes that others would find some kind of meaning through his work.

Brien's first release was the digital pseudo-cover of Drake's "Come Winter" in the summer of 2013. This song takes the backing from the original song, but replaces the lyrics with Brien's own story of a relationship he had around the time of this song's release told in 2 distinct sections. The first of these sections tells of the shaky relationship that he carried out with a girl whom he went to highschool with in which he was secretly talking with another girl at the same time. The discovery of that relationship by his girlfriend and the subsequent aftermath of their breakup shows details Brien's fall into depression and self loathing experienced as a result of his actions. It is hard not to draw connections between the first part of this song and the thematic elements found in a lot of Blues songs of the early 20th century, and rightly so. The common

themes of rap music which Rose discusses in *Black Noise* and include real-life issues such as relationships, sex and posse/group relationships (Rose 18) are abundantly and clearly present throughout the blues (one example that immediately jumps to mind is Ma Rainey's "Countin' the Blues"). Seeing this continuity of style over time from blues music (and before that African American spirituals and folk songs) to modern day genres like rap and hip hop as can be seen in Brien's "Come Winter" establishes the idea that although musical styles and tropes have changed as time has passed, the themes of African American music are largely consistent. Thus, rap music is more of an adaptation of the common expressions of rebellion and commentaries on social context found in previous genres of African American music to a post industrial and technology-driven world.

The second section of Brien's "Come Winter" tells of his rise out of his depression and his adoption of a more positive outlook on life. This section is where rap music's freeform expressionism truly shines in not only allowing artists to express the common feelings of struggling relationships, being down on your luck, and the struggles often faced by African Americans in society, but also allowing them to express the more positive aspects of life such as rising out of depression and not confining oneself to their past mistakes. The flexibility in theme that rap allows is one of the main reasons as to why the genre is the most freeing forms of musical expression, particularly for African American artists who pull inspiration and thematic ideas from previous African American genres and adapt them into modern rap variants to tell stories about their own lives.

Musically, "Come Winter" is a blend of rap and chillout/chillhop, with the original backing from Drake's song of the same name featuring a repetitive vocaloid voice repeating

various phrases throughout the song accompanied by a steady drum beat, synth piano chords, and a guitar comping over it all. While Brien did not develop the beat for this song himself but rather borrowed it from another artist, the concept of borrowing the tracking of another song is one of the other major reasons as to why rap music is the most freeing form of emotional expression and storytelling, as well as one of the most approachable for aspiring hip hop artists. Being able to pull tracks from songs currently in the mainstream (otherwise known as sampling) and remix the lyrics to tell their personal stories allows new artists not only to quickly get involved in the hip hop culture, but also lowers the “entrance fee” of getting started in the genre. It allows artists to get past the hill of learning learning how to play an instrument or how to mix a create a beat on their own and instead begin creatively expressing the emotional experiences of their lives in a more lyrically freeing and less musically constrained manner through the re-interpretation of existing music. Jason Marcus put it best in his article “Don’t Stop That Funky Beat: The Essentiality of Digital Sampling to Rap Music”, stating that “Digital sampling expresses postmodernism today in much the same sense as Andy Warhol’s canvases of Campbell’s soup cans did in the 1960’s. Both methods of artistic expression involve the re-interpretation of previously documented media in a novel setting” (Marcus 772).

Brien’s first original release, *Nine West*, came out shortly after “Come Winter”, in September of 2017. This 14 track album, which includes a remix of his first release “Come Winter,” details his transition from high school to college and the mish mash of emotions and life events that shaped who he was as a person during that time. Although this album includes several songs that use pre-existing backing tracks from other famous rap artists of the time (including Drake’s “Come Winter” and Asher Roth’s “I Love College”), it also includes the first

of Brien's own mixings. These new beats establish a musical style that gets carried over to his future releases, and helps form his unique identity as a rap artist.

The mixture of themes that was seen in "Come Winter" is present throughout *Nine West*. Themes such as falling to an emotionally low and dark place due to the stresses of life as someone transitioning from the relatively carefree life as a highschooler to the more independent-driven and self motivated life of a freshman in college are again juxtaposed with themes of developing self confidence and establishing a personal identity in the college landscape. Often, this juxtaposition is seen in the same song, such as in "No New Friends" and "Engineering." The latter of these songs in particular highlights the struggles and self doubt that engineering students face in college brought on by trying to manage a healthy work-life balance all while trying establish a new identity for yourself in order to stand out in a new and fast-paced environment. For many students, one of the ways to handle these new responsibilities is through hobbies, clubs, or community organizations. For Brien, it was rap. The creative freedom that rap music grants allowed Brien to internalize the various emotions that he experienced as a young African American college student and funnel that internalization through the mouthpiece of hip hop music.

Another major factor of this album that harks back to Rose's original thematic elements used to define rap and hip hop music as a genre is that of location. The album's title, *Nine West*, references Brien's dorm room that he lived in and called home during his freshman year as a college student. When I asked him why he decided on that name, he responded that "without the experiences and life lessons that I learned by living in Walker Tower, I would not be who I am today." He went on to tell of how he considered Nine West, the floor on which his dorm room



resided, was where he developed the album that would bear his name, and is a place that will forever be to him the birthplace of his independence. Without a doubt, the physical location of his freshman dorm played a major role in shaping not only who he was as a person, but also how he expressed who he was through his music.

*Drink Up*, Brien's most recent album which debuted in March of 2017, shows how he took the unique identity and technical skills that he forged while living as a freshman in Walker Tower Nine West and adapted them to tell the story of how he pulled his life back together after battling with a serious bout of depression in 2015. Before releasing the album itself, Brien released updates as to the album's progress, as well as information on the inspiration for the album on his Bandcamp page. In this description, he states that "throughout this entire ordeal, Life has handed you, me, all of us things we could not control or change. We had no choice but to take what life threw us in stride. We've all had experiences that have molded us into who we are. *Drink Up* is mine, presented in a way to show you life through my eyes, and for you the listener to think about yours." It is apparent through this description that Brien has used his understanding of rap to articulate his life experiences in a way that he felt best highlighted the struggles not only that he faced, but that all of us face at some point in life.

"Drink Up," the first song on the album that bears its name, is an ideal example of this theme of communal struggle. The song starts out with the line "Now sometimes life handed us a big ass cup full of whatever. And you already knew that you had to drink it. These are our stories." Taken from the context laid out by Brien in his descriptive prelude to the album, this line is in reference to the depression that he battled in late 2015. According to him, it was the lowest point in his life. However, rather than be consumed by dark thoughts and depressive

tendencies, he decided to drink up the cup that life offered him, and as he puts it throughout the song make lemonade from that cup. When I asked him directly why he made this album, he said that he wanted to make a piece of work that “everyone who has ever been at the point in life where I was, that there is something better. But it’s not going to be handed to you. You have to take the punches that life throws at you, and that sucks. But getting past that and putting time into yourself can payoff in the long run.”

This album demonstrates one of the greatest qualities of rap music as a form of musical expression. It shows that even though rap music is often used to tell personal stories of a rap artist’s life, it also serves as a means to creatively connect with audiences who relate, either directly or indirectly, to the message behind the story being told. Because of this community dialog, rap music is the quintessential modern form of creative artistic interpretation.

Conclusively, rap music and the culture that surrounds it provides a creative outlet for young African American artists to tell stories about their lives and the experiences that molded them. It does so in a musically freeing way in that it requires very little technical knowledge to get started, it isn’t confined to a specific instrumentation or equipment, and it revolves around telling stories however one sees fit. Rap music is a continuation of a trend laid out by previous African American musical genres such as African spirituals and folk songs as well as the blues. However, rather than simply continuing with the thematic elements of these genres, rap takes those themes and adapts them to a post-industrial world with technology that affords its contributors the ability to creatively express those themes in new and exciting ways that were previously unattainable.

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