Mama said knock you out

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became prime minister – and a rap record was a hit for the first time. *Mark Fisher* reflects on how for three decades hip-hop has provided the perfect soundtrack to the brutality of the neoliberal world-view

A flash of gold: the Sugarhill Gang in 1980 with Carl "Kung-Fu Fighting" Douglas (second from left) and Joe "Rap-O Clap-O" Bataan (near right)

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Both rap and neoliberalism are 30 years old: 1979, the year that Margaret Thatcher was elected, was also the year when the Sugarhill Gang had the first bona fide hip-hop hit with "Rapper's Delight". At the time, few anticipated either the impact that neoliberalism and hip-hop would have, or the way in which they would come to echo one another. "Rapper's Delight", with its steal from Chic's "Good Times" providing a backdrop to freestyling rhymes, was treated as little more than a post-disco novelty record. But within a decade hip-hop would be the globally dominant pop music and neoliberalism would have changed the political/economic climate.

What hip-hop and neoliberalism have in common is an emphasis on "keeping it real". Neoliberalism emerged by defining itself against what it labelled as an unrealistic and unsustainable programme of social welfare and public spending. In Britain, as Andy Beckett reminds us in his recent *When the Lights Went Out*, neoliberal "realism" was auditioned in James Callaghan's speech to the Labour party conference in Blackpool in 1976. It was here that Callaghan, justifying spending cuts demanded by the International Monetary Fund, claimed that Britain's postwar consensus had been living on "borrowed time". His speechwriter Peter Jay referred to a "new realism" – a phrase, he ruefully noted when Beckett interviewed him, that Thatcher took up. And for neoliberals the truth is that people are motivated by competition and acquisitiveness, not by altruism.

Built from an upbeat disco sample, "Rapper's Delight" was a party record. The subsequent huge hit "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five set a different tone: its vision of a collapsed infrastructure, apathy and dejection reflected the then state of New York City, but the perspective was one of critical social commentary, not of identification with the brutal conditions. Already, however, hip-hop was engaged in a process of unlearning the fluid surrealism that dominated the psychedelic funk of George Clinton and Sly Stone in the 1970s.

Hip-hop disciplined the looseness of funk, encasing it in the hard snare-drum sound on the Tommy Boy records of the early 1980s. It was as if, under pressure from the newly harsh economic regime – Ronald Reagan came to power in 1981 – the funk body had stiffened into the phallic posturing of the rapper. Instead of the delirium of psychedelic funk, its gaze focused on UFOs and distant stars, the rapper's eyes were fixed on the street, until staying "street" became code for a contracted sense of reality.

The militancy of Public Enemy in the mid-1980s, and their ballistic, information-dense use of sampling, were envisaged as a critical intervention into this "reality". For Chuck D, the New York group's lead rapper, staying vigilant, refusing to allow oneself to submit to the pacifying effects of drugs and the media, was a political duty. But rather than presaging an era of politicised hip-hop, Public Enemy's vision of "CNN for black folks" proved to be the end of a sequence of popular politicised black music. There would always be socially conscious hip-hop, but never again would it be as popular as Public Enemy made it.

Schoolly D, another rapper who emerged in the mid-1980s with an album of pummelling minimalism, was more typical of the coming trend. At the time, his assertion of a swaggering survivalist ego, locked in a permanent kill-or-be-killed struggle for recognition, caused consternation among left-wing and liberal commentators, prompting a discussion which continues to this day about whether this music merely reflected violence or actually caused it. When you listen

Hip-hop, you don't stop: landmark records

Rapper's Delight Sugarhill Gang (1979, Sugarhill Records)
The record that took hip-hop overground. A breakdown version of Chic's "Good Times", adorned with glorious freestyling rhymes.

The Message Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (1982, Sugarhill Records)
Scratching makes its debut on this spry, compulsive ode to inner-city blues.

Raising Hell Run-DMC (1986, Profile/Arista)
Conspicuously bereft of aggression and profanity, *Raising Hell* announced the genre's commercial viability.

Paid In Full Eric B and Rakim (1987, Fourth and Broadway/Island)
The MC/DJ duo inaugurated the golden age of hip-hop with a raw yet complex and smoothly delivered epic.

It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back Public Enemy (1988, Def Jam)
This politically charged masterpiece was hugely influential, the Bomb Squad's production methods setting new standards.

Straight Outta Compton NWA (1988, Ruthless/Priority)
Attitude-laden, incendiary forerunner to "gangsta" rap. The future stars Dr Dre and Ice Cube lead the lyrical violence.

3 Feet High and Rising De La Soul (1989, Tommy Boy/Warner Brothers)
The quirky, buoyant "Daisy Age" sound is born. A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah and the Jungle Brothers all helped spread a little peace, love and understanding.

Death Certificate Ice Cube (1991, Priority)
A potent combination of gangsta rap and salient social commentary took this to the top of the *Billboard* charts.

The Chronic Dr Dre (1992, Death Row/Interscope)
This sublime solo debut is still the best-produced album ever in the genre. The benchmark.

Illmatic Nas (1994, Columbia)
It took seven years for this to go platinum but its conviction rejuvenated East Coast rap.

Ready to Die Notorious BIG (1994, Bad Boy)
A prophetic title for the ill-starred rapper's album, containing some of the most complex lyrics hip-hop fans had heard to date.

All Eyez on Me 2Pac (1996, Death Row/Interscope)
Seven months before his death, Tupac Shakur delivered the quintessential celebration of the gangsta lifestyle.

Reasonable Doubt Jay-Z (1996, Roc-A-Fella/Priority)
The life of a hustler set to a diverse collection of beats. A simple but devastatingly effective formula, it proved the bedrock for Shawn Carter's monolithic career.

Speakerboxxx/The Love Below OutKast (2003, LaFace/Arista)
The 21st century demanded evolution, and OutKast duly obliged. The only hip-hop group to receive the coveted Album of the Year Grammy.

The College Dropout Kanye West (2004, Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam)
Abjuring gangsta rhymes and eschewing bass-heavy beats, West exploded on to the scene with this pivotal development in modern hip-hop.

Ed Henry

back to Schoolly D now with ears accustomed to later gangsta rap, it sounds a little cartoonish, but it marked a turning point of sorts: hip-hop was no longer commenting on the savage realities of the 'hood, but hyperbolically revelling in them.

The stage was set for hip-hop's embracing of the gangster. Its adherents were fixated on films such as the *Godfather* trilogy, *Goodfellas* and (a particular favourite) *Scarface*, because they presented a kind of anti-mythical myth. The world they projected – of generalised betrayal, distrust and exploitation – was in tune with the capitalist realism of neoliberalism, except that hip-hop's celebration of the crime lord, its sense that there was ultimately no difference between the tycoon and the criminal, acted as an unintentional parody of neoliberal rapacity. Even so, the left was faced with the melancholy prospect that the dominant form of black popular music was now a celebration of conspicuous consumption and will to power. In hip-hop, as in neoliberalism, economics bullied politics out of the picture.

Last month, the LA producers Sa-Ra Creative Partners released *Nuclear Evolution: the Age of Love*. It is not really a hip-hop record. Rap is just one element of Sa-Ra's sound, which, instead of hip-hop's habitual hyper-awake state of survivalist awareness, is bleary and dreamy and diffusely erotic. What seems to be returning here is the psychedelic utopianism that hip-hop rejected in order to demonstrate its realism. In common with Clinton's Funkadelic and their near-namesake the avant-jazz exponent Sun Ra, Sa-Ra's language is science fictional, their songs laced with references to the cosmos, stars and spaceships.

But Sa-Ra are not alone: it is possible to hear their music as the culmination of an anti-gangsta tendency – including J Dilla, OutKast and Kanye West – that has quietly coalesced in hip-hop over the past decade. In fact, it is difficult to classify West's last album, *808s and Heartbreak* (2008), with its strange electronic melancholy and uncanny auto-tuned singing, as straightforwardly a hip-hop record at all. Instead, West and Sa-Ra are perhaps best considered a return to psychedelic soul, the genre synthesised from out-there rock, jazz and funk by Sly Stone and developed by the Motown sonic conceptualist Norman Whitfield in his experimental productions for the Temptations and the Undisputed Truth.

With the bank crisis literally discrediting the neoliberal model of reality, and Barack Obama's election raising utopian hopes after the dark reign of George Bush, could it be that hip-hop's status as top dog in black popular music is finally coming to an end? ●

Mark Fisher's "Capitalist Realism" will be published in December by Zero Books. He blogs at http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org