

Assignment 4: Hip-Hop Song Analysis

This week you are going to apply musical analysis to one of the all-time Hip-Hop classics -- Eric B. & Rakim's "[Paid in Full](#)" (1987).

This song was chosen as an exercise, at this moment of the course, for significant historical reasons. This song was produced at a turning point in Hip-Hop history when DJ techniques were going to be sidelined and replaced by sampling of the producers. In this song, you can still hear a lot of DJ scratching showcased by Eric B. at the ending part of this song, which coexisted with carefully crafted sampling, engineering, and mixing with studio expert knowledge.

According to Soul Sonic Forces: Technology, Orality, and Black Cultural Practice in Rap Music,

Eric B. and Rakim's 1986 debut album represents a critical moment in the development of rap's sonic presence, the articulation of technology as a colleague in the creation and a forthright acknowledgment of music as commodity. Paid in Full is explicit both about the economic and cultural considerations at work in rap music.

Musically speaking, few rap albums have been able to match the gritty, heavy, dark beats and overall character of Paid in Full, although a number of attempts have been made [until 1994 at least].

Let's see how the album engineer Patrick Adams explained his approach to the sounds. In [his interview with the Red Bull Music Academy](#), he said

Back then most people would use a drum machine and the samples were flat and they sound horrible. One of the reasons Paid In Full sounds so good was my perception of – that don't sound the way drums are supposed to sound. Drums are supposed to have this meat to them, this reflection from the walls and whatnot. That was probably a major contribution of mine, the fact that all the samples on that album are in pitch. Most rap albums in the middle '80s, the samples were in different keys and it'll hurt your ears after a while. It just was sonically sick. So Eric B. and Rakim, they allowed me to pitch their samples up or down until they were in relative keys. And then I mixed the album.

Adams elaborated on his two contributions to the *engineering* of the album. Pay attention to the difference here. This song is *produced* by Eric B. (it was rumored to be produced by Marley Marl), and it's *engineered* or *mixed* by Patrick Adams and Elai Tubo (it seems Elai Tubo is the recording engineer and Patrick Adams was responsible for mixing). Check the [album credits](#) here. Producer and engineer are two different roles although in Hip-Hop these roles are not always well-defined and often overlap.

The first contribution is that Adams added "the meat" to the drum sound, basically using reverb or room acoustics. The other contribution he mentioned is to pitch the samples to relative keys so the sounds don't clash, or else "it'll hurt your ears after a while". These works were done based on Adams's musical sensitivity and indispensable technological skills.

In terms of beat analysis, Tricia Rose gives us a textbook example:

The title cut opens with a multidrum rhythm section^[1] and a dialogue between Eric B. and Rakim that locates them within a particular recording and production camp. The first verse opens with the bass line from Dennis Edwards's "Don't Look any Further"^[2]; in it, Rakim tells the story of life on the edge and constantly returns to money, the means of survival. The constant cutting and mixing of Eric B.'s music keeps the listener in a perpetual state of anticipation; the walking bass line and the flute riff give the illusion of a lyric and purposeful gait^[3]. Rakim's deep and ominous voice combined with sarcastic references to life on the edge of respectability keep the listener on edge^[4].....

Note: the numbers below correspond to the superscripts in the above passage.

1. The opening drums are sampled from "Ashley's Roachclip" by Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers. Use [WhoSampled](#) to listen to these samples and see how they were manipulated in the Hip-Hop composition.
2. Pay attention to how Tricia Rose seamlessly incorporated the sample analysis into her beat analysis. The samples are embedded in the beat so don't separate them from the beat and analyze independently out of the context.
3. An excellent example of beat analysis on both *beat description* and *beat function*, and an organic combination of the two. Try to write your analysis in a similar way. This may be difficult but you are supposed to learn from the best.
4. In terms of Rakim's voice, the album engineer Patrick Adams explained:

Anybody who's an engineer knows, when you have somebody who's right up in the mic and their projection is powerful, all you're going to hear is 'pop, pop, pop.' It was actually out of frustration. One night, I said, I'll use a bass drum mic [on Rakim's voice]. So, I went and I took the RE20 out the closet and I said, "Here, talk into this." Because, it didn't matter – compression, limiter – nothing helped. I put that RE20 there, he got up on the mic and, "Yeah, pump up the bass." The bottom of his voice just came right up and the rest of his voice was right in your face. And I put a compressor on that. That was wonderful and that's how we arrived at that.

Except for the digital revolution in production this song/album ushered, Rakim's performances here represent a quantum leap in MCing. In a music review by Steve Huey,

One of the most influential rap albums of all time, Eric B. & Rakim's Paid in Full only continues

*to grow in stature as the record that ushered in hip-hop's modern era... Rakim basically invents modern lyrical technique over the course of *Paid in Full*, with his complex internal rhymes, literate imagery, velvet-smooth flow, and unpredictable, off-the-beat rhythms...*

From the next Module, we are stepping into the orality side of Hip-Hop. Rakim's flow is valued as a milestone in the development of the art of MCing/rapping. Listen to Rakim's flow in *Paid in Full* and compare it with Run-D.M.C.'s rap in [Sucker MC's](#) and [It's Like That](#). How the flows sound different and what improvements Rakim made in terms of rhythm and rhymes? If you continue to read Rose's paper, she also presented some lyrical and contextual analysis on *Paid in Full* that might be helpful.

Read the descriptions and instructions above. Answer all the questions and write a song analysis to *Paid in Full* based on your understanding. The song analysis consists of *beat analysis*, *lyrical analysis*, and *DJ technique (scratching) analysis*. Use the tools: [WhoSampled](#) for beat listening, [Genius](#) for lyrical understanding, and [Grandmaster Flash's "How to do a Break Mix"](#) for turntablism. If you are better than that, you can analyze with [15 Levels of Turntable Scratching](#). Minimum 450 words in total.