Rhyme and Revolution: Tracing Hip-Hop's Transformative Journey

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Surpassing the status of a genre for casual listening and mindless entertainment, hip-hop has evolved to become one of the most influential forms of art and has been used as a tool for political expression. Since my teenage days, I have been a part of this world, not only as a consumer but as an artist, making beats till 3 AM on school nights. The genre's ability to express emotion and storytelling has left a mark on the lives of millions across the world.

"Since its emergence in the South Bronx and throughout the northeast during the early and mid-1970s, Hip-hop has encompassed not just a musical genre, but also a style of dress, dialect and language, way of looking at the world"[1]. From block parties to street performances, it embraced the culture of togetherness and collaboration. DJs like Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash are notable figures who started spinning turntables, manipulating audio live to create music never heard before. These block parties were also where break dancing became synonymous with hip-hop, with B-boys and B-girls showcasing their acrobatic virtuosity. The energy at such events was infectious and helped cement the social and cultural foundations of the genre.

A decade later in the 80s, hip-hop saw a shift in the subjects of its lyricism. From songs that were made to bring joy and excitement to listeners, hip-hop became a platform for artists to discuss social and political issues faced predominantly by African American and Latino communities - one of the first being Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 1982 hit song "The Message". Discussing topics like poverty, violence, and drug abuse (all of which were previously avoided by the mainstream media), hip-hop became a tool used to tell stories of the struggles faced in the everyday lives of these communities.

Throughout Hip-hop's evolution, many artists such as N.W.A. and Kendrick Lamar have left their mark on the genre, talking about socio-economic issues faced by oppressed minorities.

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[1] Alridge and Stewart, "Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present, and Future," 190.

Technological advancements changing how hip-hop is created, distributed, and consumed alongside the influence of multiple genres such as funk, soul, R&B, jazz, and blues have caused hip-hop to continuously shed its skin, only to come out better than ever. Hip-hop has evolved into a global cultural phenomenon that is used as a platform for political expression and social movements due to the diversification of its styles and sounds, as well as the influence of live performances and audience demographics.

In the 1970s, "DJs from the Bronx and Harlem developed techniques for manually scratching vinyl records into a seamless mix of dance music. DJs favoured an elite collection of soul, funk and R&B for their samples, from artists such as James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, Isaac Hayes and George Clinton"[2]. Scratching refers to the process of manipulating vinyl records on turntables to produce rhythmic sounds and effects. This technique was coined by DJ Grand Wizard Theodore who discovered that moving a vinyl record back and forth under a turntable's needle produced unique sounds that could be integrated into his music. "Scratching itself is subdivided into countless variations. The simple back-and-forth scratch that Theodore developed came to be known as the baby, but there are more advanced scratches such as the stab, the crab, the tear, the flare..."[3]. Soon enough, DJs like Grandmaster Flash and Kool Herc adopted this technique into their own live performances. Scratching has an extremely high skill ceiling and requires very precise timing and practice to master allowing DJs to distinguish themselves far above amateurs.

In more recent years, vinyl record turntables have been replaced with digital versions such as the Pioneer CDJ-3000. The process of scratching has, however, become less associated with hip-hop and instead has been adopted by electronic music. With the advancements technology has brought to the world of turntablism, DJs are now able to loop, stretch, pitch, and chop up audio to

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[2] Demers, "Sampling the 1970s in Hip-Hop," 41.
[3] Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop*, 62.

a much greater extent. "Due to the technology in today's turntables, the DJ doesn't have to play the same song simultaneously anymore, in order to repeat a section of that song"[4]. DJs are still vital parts of hip-hop culture, however, their roles have changed, focusing more on playing the songs for their rappers to perform and less on the art of scratching.

Transitioning over to the 1980s, scratching was considered old school and replaced with the process of sampling – one of the trademark techniques adopted by hip-hop since its conception. This is the term used to describe taking a section of an existing recording and creating something new out of it, allowing hip-hop to always have a fresh and relevant sound and style. Innovations in digital sampling technology permitted hip-hop artists to experiment with a more diverse assortment of source music ranging from heavy metal to country. The availability of drum machines and samplers allowed for a whole new dimension of artistic freedom when it came to real-time audio manipulation as well.

Wu-Tang's 1993 anthem C.R.E.A.M is one of the most iconic songs featuring a sample. The song, produced by RZA, features the piano melody from "As Long As I've Got You" by The Charmels (produced by Isaac Hayes). RZA used an Akai S950 sampler to chop up pieces of the original track, creating a new loop to rap over. The drums in the track are also sampled from "Impeach the President" by The Honey Drippers – a classic drum loop that can be found in various notable tracks over the years. This is a perfect example displaying how sampling allows producers to breathe new life into existing melodies and build on the legacy of their predecessors.

In more recent times, a famous sample that many are not aware of can be found in Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" produced by YoungKio. He sampled Nine Inch Nails's "34 Ghosts IV" by taking the intro banjo sample and manipulating it in FL Studio – his DAW (Digital Audio

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[4] Schloss and Chang, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop (Music / Culture)* (Wesleyan University Press, 2014).

Workstation) of choice. The fusion of hip-hop and country music alongside Nas's infectious vocals took the world by storm, blowing up on charts globally. YoungKio released a video[5] breaking down how he created the beat for the song. By having a look at his workflow and thought process, it is very evident how technology has made the process of beat-making and sampling so much more accessible and streamlined. Overall, "Old Town Road" demonstrates the continued evolution of hip-hop through the innovative use of sampling and cross-genre inspiration.

Aside from technological advancements leading to the rise of new and improved production techniques, the digital era has significantly contributed to the distribution of hip-hop. From the invention of cassettes and CDs (compact discs) to the availability of any song on a smartphone, the consumption and distribution of hip-hop have seen a drastic change over the years. This transformation has not only made the genre more accessible to a global audience but has also nurtured collaboration and cross-cultural influences.

In the late 70s, record sales were at an all-time low due to the economic recession paired with the invention of the cassette. While such a lightweight and portable successor to vinyl records made it easier for fans to purchase and enjoy music, it also led to one of the first major problems in the world of music piracy. Cassettes made it easier for individuals to duplicate and share copyrighted music without authorization which completely overthrew the sale of the more expensive and clunky vinyl records. While record labels were facing backlash at this time, cassettes made it possible for anyone to record a mixtape/demo which heavily promoted the growth of the underground hip-hop scene.

By the 1980s-1990s, the invention of the CD had taken the world by storm. It solved many of the problems faced by cassettes such as their durability and significantly improved the sound

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[5] Genius, (2019) YouTube.

quality of the recorded media. Cassettes were tedious to work with, often needing to be wound up. CDs on the other hand were plug and play which made them a lot more attractive options. "Advertised by its designers as providing "perfect sound forever," the small, silvery plastic discs could reproduce music with extremely low distortion and without surface noise, turntable rumble, or other troublesome aspects of vinyl record playback"[6]. They also enforced a degree of copyright protection with the help of copy protection and digital rights management (DRM) implemented.

The next major step in the distribution of media was the rise of streaming platforms. The widespread adoption of the internet dramatically transformed the distribution and marketing of music. Previously, record labels held a tight grip on which artists and tracks gained exposure, however, the emergence of platforms such as Spotify, iTunes, and SoundCloud in the 2000s allowed creators to bypass record label bureaucracy and release music directly to their fans. "For listeners these days, sniffing out new music has never been easier, either through Spotify, doing a search on YouTube, or listening to Internet radio like Pandora or the newly launched iTunes Radio"[7]. In addition to gaining control over their releases and promotional strategies, artists could also retain a larger share of their earnings compared to working with record labels. Hip-hop has always had a prominent underground scene and SoundCloud is a platform that has promoted small artists by allowing them to share their music for free. XXXTentacion is an artist who became famous by posting his home-recorded music to SoundCloud and achieved widespread recognition for his iconic lyricism and flow. This shows how digital platforms have changed modern music and helped new artists breakthrough in the industry.

As a result of all the changes in technologies, influences, and production techniques, hip-hop has gone through a multitude of different sounds and styles. The Old School hip-hop era (the

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[6] Downes, "'Perfect Sound Forever': Innovation, Aesthetics, and the Re-Making of Compact Disc Playback," 305.
[7] Blankenship, "Beats Music: A New Subscription Streaming Service Business Model Takes the Stage".

late 1970s – early 1980s) featured artists and groups such as DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and the Furious Five. The sound of this time is characterized by the four pillars of hip-hop culture: DJing, rapping (MCing), breakdancing, and graffiti art. "The goal of deejays, b-boys, graffiti artists, and MCs is to entertain, amuse, and create—not merely to signify. Any discussion of hip-hop aesthetics that omits how much fun it is makes an error similar to a discussion that confuses blues music with feeling 'blue'."[8] This was the era that laid out the foundations for the future.

The Golden Age of hip-hop (the late 1980s – early 1990s) was when the genre started becoming a platform for artists to address social, political, and economic issues in their lyrics. Artists like Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, and N.W.A. utilized their music to address social issues. While a lot of the issues discussed were valid, often a lot of the lyrics were hateful and full of rage. "Amiri Baraka's "Black Art," for instance, illustrates the extent to which anger would dictate this poet's creative path:"[9]

> *"... we want "poems that kill."*
>
> *Assassin poems, Poems that shoot*
>
> *Guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys*
>
> *And take their weapons leaving them dead*
>
> *With tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland…"*

Lyrics were often misogynistic, using lyrics like "whore" and "gold-digger", especially in gangsta rap, which could be seen as influencing teens negatively. There are a lot of references to sex, drugs, and alcohol, all of which were looked at as crude and uncivilized. On the other hand, there were rappers like KRS-One who would try to spread a more positive message while still addressing issues they faced in their lives. "…not every hip-hop artist deals with social frustration

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[8] Schur, "Defining Hip-Hop Aesthetics", University of Michigan Press, 44
[9] Gladney, "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop", (1995), 292

in a negative, anti-social manner; many strive to deal effectively with reality through art. They do not seek simply to draw pictures of the urban blight, but seek instead to stimulate thought and discussion concerning the issues raised in the music".[10]

During this time, there was an expansion of hip-hop across the United States. The West Coast and East Coast both had their own styles, developing distinct regional sounds. The East Coast was the home to artists like Eric B. & Rakim and Big Daddy Kane whose music had a strong jazz influence and complex lyricism. On the other side of the country, Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, and Ice Cube popularized the use of laid-back grooves and synthesizers in hip-hop – a genre that came to be known as G-Funk. This diversification of styles contributed to the richness of hip-hop as a genre and its appeal to a wider audience.

The Modern Era of hip-hop (the late 1990s – the present) has seen unprecedented mainstream success. A genre that was once considered barbaric and uncouth became a large part of popular culture. Artists like Eminem, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar are some of the largest names in the world, each boasting a vast discography. The use of hip-hop in other media such as movies and advertisements has also become prevalent. Due to the rise in popularity of the genre, it sparked a creative flare in the new generation that led to a plethora of sub-genres such as trap, drill, and dancehall. In modern hip-hop, lyrics have become increasingly diverse, tackling a wide range of themes from personal struggles to songs about partying all day and night long.

The popularization of the genre led to a big shift in its demography. Until the 2000s, the primary audience for male hip-hop artists, who were predominantly Black, consisted of Black males. "…the most detailed study of rap's effect on adolescents was conducted by Kuwahara (1992). This study found that 13.3% of Black college students listened to rap all the time, and

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[10] Gladney, "The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop", (1995), 292

29.7% listened to rap often. Kuwahara also found that Black men had a stronger preference for rap than Black women. The analysis of White college students revealed that 51.6% of White men and 68.9% of White women *seldom* or *never* listened to rap. When the two groups were compared, White students demonstrated less knowledge of rap acts regardless of their preference for rap music. However, Whites and Blacks did not differ much in their reasons for listening to rap. Both groups preferred the beat most and the message second."[11] However, when Eminem, the first white rapper, started achieving significant success, the genre's demographic began to expand, attracting more white listeners to hip-hop. Dr. Dre, a pivotal figure in Eminem's rise to fame, primarily had a Black fanbase. As Dre supported Eminem's career, many of Dre's fans became fans of Eminem, and vice-versa, broadening the genre's demographic. Eminem addressed this topic in his song, "White America":

> *"every fan black that I got*
>
> *Was prob'ly 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 startin' to work to my benefit now?"*

In this paper, we have traced the evolution of hip-hop from block parties in the Bronx to becoming a global phenomenon. By exploring the various factors that influenced this evolution, including the rise of the digital era and the diversification of its styles and sounds, we have seen how hip-hop has transcended the boundaries of a traditional genre of music, now serving as a platform for political expression and social movements.

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[11] Sullivan, "Rap and Race: It's Got a Nice Beat, But What About the Message?", 610-611.

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