

ILLMATIC – HIP HOP’S MAGNUM OPUS

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PREFACE

Ask any Hip Hop enthusiast which rap artists they'd class as "the greatest of all time" and you're bound to get a varied set of answers -- it's quite a divisive topic. Yet, a few names will appear in almost every list: Biggie Smalls, Tupac, and Nas. Of these, the first two are Hip Hop's most notorious larger than life personalities that helped spread rap from the alleyways of New York City's ghettos to the car radios of every American suburban family -- it's not up for debate whether Tupac and Biggie were influential or great musicians. However, their discographies are simply lacking a record that can be said to wholly capture the essence of Hip Hop culture -- in other words, they are no Illmatic. Illmatic, Nas' debut album, emerged "straight out the fuckin' dungeons of rap", where the daily struggles left the young Nas a street veteran. Thus, he was able to serve as a conduit, lamenting on the struggles of the black youth in New York City in a

time of severe racial tensions. Nas had encapsulated the reality of his surroundings in a merely forty minute long tape. That, to me, makes Illmatic the golden standard for rap music -- it IS Hip Hop, bundled up in a timeless package ready to enlighten any listener. How did this album come about, and what makes it the monumental work that it is?

It is all too easy to get tangled up in rap's strange value system ("who has the catchiest flow?; who can rap the fastest?; who has the best lyrics?"), to the point of forgetting that rap is indeed a genre of music, and is therefore in the same category as things like Folk music, Opera, Indian Classical music and so on. All music consists of the same basic building blocks -- timbre, pitch, rhythm, and melody. Songs are distinguished by which sounds they employ (timbre), the notes created with these sounds (pitch), and the pattern of arrangement of said notes (melody and rhythm). This framework applies to Illmatic just like it applies to, for example, Mongolian Throat Singing. This makes it clear that the physical aspects of music are significant, as we can clearly distinguish between the sentiment of the music of Nas as opposed to the music of a gruff Mongolian man. For this reason we'll spend ample time discussing the 'musical' aspects of Illmatic, as they make up half the justification for its alleged status as Hip Hop's magnum opus.

Hip Hop as a genre tends to follow a common framework. A song typically consists of a "beat" and "vocals". Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that both of these elements are rather unique, especially in the Western sphere of music.

Beats (which is really a colloquial term for 'instrumental') are usually looped short sections of drums and melody, with little variation (typically only changing slightly during the 'chorus' section of a song). The reason for this is historical. The largely accepted theory is that Hip Hop was birthed in 1973 by DJ Kool Herc amidst a birthday party at his Bronx apartment. Kool Herc, a disc jockey (someone who plays existing recorded music for a live audience) realized that the crowd entered an ecstatic, trance-like state during the 'drum break' of a song -- a brief section where all vocals and instruments besides drums are dropped. At the party, Herc took advantage of this and began to extend a drum break by looping it. This technique was a direct precursor to the looped beats now commonplace in rap music. Moving forward to 1994, the year *Illmatic* was released, beats had undergone their fair share of change, but the basic structure remained the same. Drums (usually a kick, snare, and hi-hat) make up the skeleton of the track. This is the part of the beat that keeps the listener engaged, nodding their head to the rhythm, each thudding kick mirroring the beat of their heart. The drums also serve the important function of accenting the rapper's vocals -- something that will be discussed later. Something worth noting is that the drums are not live, but rather programmed into a pattern using an electronic machine (such as the Akai MPC or the Roland SP303). This is a clue pointing to influence from dance music, such as disco. On top of the drums lays a melody. However, unlike the Trap-flavored Hip Hop of the late 2010s, Hip Hop in the 90s rarely employed synthesizers. Rather, the go-to technique at the time was 'sampling'. Sampling consists of taking another recorded piece of music and repurposing it in a different composition. The importance of this is

not to be understated, as it allowed producers (the people making the beats) to channel their precursors -- the African American musicians of the early 20th century. In the 90s, Hip Hop producers were usually young black men, and they were sampling Jazz, Soul, and R&B -- all music made by those from a similar cultural background as them, who likely lived through the very same struggles. In a way, sampling allowed the older generations to pass the torch to the youth, making Hip Hop the new de facto African American music.

Layered over the beat are vocals from a rapper -- more traditionally referred to as an MC or Master of Ceremonies. The title MC (sometimes spelled emcee) comes from the rapper's function at the time -- MCs were "simply on hand to get the crowd excited about the DJ and to announce upcoming appearances. If any rhyming was to be done by the MC, it was to talk about how great the DJ was." Over time, Hip Hop's landscape changed to have rappers at the forefront of a performance, to the point where producers/DJs almost completely faded away from the spotlight. As such, both the audible aspects and lyrical content of rap vocals changed significantly. With some help from a few influential early rappers, lyrics changed from almost solely party-centric chants to somber narratives of inner city life. Simultaneously, the complexity of the rhyme schemes evolved from cat-in-the-hat-with-a-baseball-bat rap to physically demanding performances. Note that the basic components of rap vocals remained though -- the flow and the rhyme. Rap vocals are unique in two ways: that they are delivered in a constant pitch, and that they rhyme. This means that the vocals do not really create a melody at all, which might be the very antithesis to what many naive

people in the Western world consider vocals to be. Melody is replaced with flow, which is the 'rap slang' equivalent of rhythmic vocal delivery. In rap music, lyrics are organized through the use of bars (whether consciously or not), which together make up a verse (which is essentially a rap paragraph). Each bar contains 4 beats (well, if the song has a 4/4 time signature, which it almost always does). Of those beats, the first is the 'downbeat', during which a kick is usually struck, and the last is the 'upbeat', upon which a snare is struck. When 'spitting' (a term synonymous to 'rapping'), a rapper will traditionally place their rhyming words on the upbeat. This emphasizes the rhyme, and provides a way to organize the lyrics. Typically each bar contains one sentence, with the last word of each sentence rhyming with the next (creating an AABB rhyme scheme pattern, if you're into that). Of course there are many variations upon this, and due to many innovations over time there are all sorts of embellishments such as internal rhymes, multisyllabic rhymes, and sentences that persist beyond the bar line. This paragraph would not be complete without a discussion of the typical themes that constitute "good" lyricism. _____

The last necessary step to understanding Illmatic is redefining Hip Hop. So far I've been loosely using the term as a synonym of rap, but in reality Hip Hop is a culture. The culture comprises four elements: deejaying, MCing, graffiti painting, and B-boying (also known as breakdancing, though it seems that within the culture this term is not preferred). Pioneer KRS-One describes Hip Hop as "the consciousness that rap music comes out of...; the behavior; the lifestyle; the way to view the world." In this way, Hip Hop is a philosophy as much as it is a musical genre. _____