

Michaella A. Zias
ENGL 1101-III
Aron Pease
November 2022

COVER LETTER

This essay should be placed under the chapter “*Hip-Hop Transcends: How the World Is Affected and Has Affected Hip-Hop*” of *The Hip Hop Reader*, version 2. This essay takes a deep dive into how Caribbean culture has affected hip-hop. The sounds of the Caribbean islands and Caribbean people have added to what hip-hop is today. When it comes to the origin of hip-hop and the way people categorize it, they tend to forget that music is adaptive and that a lot of it has to take inspiration from somewhere—often outside of the United States. The places where the inspiration forms are not given enough credit. This chapter shines a light on these places, and this essay gives the Caribbean the credit it deserves. The Caribbean influence on hip-hop has been there since day one. This essay will further explore the origins of this kind of music and add to *The Hip Hop Reader*, version 2, to show that all is not as it seems. Understanding the backstory of traditional American hip-hop and how, although people believe it is hegemonic, it actually took influence and adaptation to be perceived as the dominant form of music.

The Islands and People of the Caribbean and Hip-Hop Intertwined

I grew up in the North, Boston, to be specific. My father is Haitian and was born and raised in New York. My mother is half Puerto Rican, half Haitian, and was born and raised in Boston. I grew up in my culture and also in these two cities. The majority was white, but the minority was not really set when we looked around. We just had POC (people of color). There were Brazilians, Cape Verdeans, and Vietnamese people, but the majority within the minority population were Caribbean. Almost every island was represented within the community, and because of this, Caribbean culture felt like the standard. Everyone adapted to it and had an understanding of it.

The Caribbean is known for a lot of things, but one thing everyone seems not to know or seems to forget is that Caribbean culture has been present in hip-hop since the beginning. The origin of hip-hop and the Caribbean are intertwined, and that needs to be represented more often. Artists like Kodak Black or the Fugees are looked at, and people are amazed and intrigued by their backgrounds and how they have brought their culture into hip-hop as a part of their identity and, thus, their music and presence, but they do not realize that their cultures were a part of the blueprint of what American hip-hop is today.

Music is a form of expression; it is something that is affected by a person's being. Their identity goes into what they create and their sound. Their beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences affect their music, and it has been this way forever. It is no different when it comes to hip-hop. One can listen to a song and know if it came from the East, West, or South. In the same sense, one can listen to most Caribbean songs and know what island they came from. Hip-hop is so universal that it can transcend different cultures and different places across the globe. You can rap in any language, and you can DJ with any sound. It is able to expand creativity, and there is always something new to do and create.

New York is the state where hip-hop began. The Bronx is the borough where it all started. Emceeing, DJ-ing, breakdancing, graffiti, and beatboxing were the first elements of hip-hop. DJ Kool Herc, one of the first creators or contributors to the creation and development of hip-hop, was Jamaican-American. He

was known as the father of hip-hop. Even when people may not notice it, Caribbean culture has been present in American hip-hop. Breaking down the elements and origins of hip-hop can open one's eyes to how little people know about the origins of the things they listen to, and can change people's perceptions of it.

Jamaican culture is the starting point. Not only is the founding father of hip-hop Jamaican-American, but reggae music, which is a part of Jamaican culture, has direct ties to DJ-ing and hip-hop. The article "*Reggae's Impact on Hip-Hop*" by Jamie Ann Board goes more in-depth into exactly how reggae has impacted hip-hop and helps this essay surface this topic. Reggae dubbing (an electronic music style) and toasting (also known as DJ-ing) led to emceeing (formally known as rapping) and scratching. Jamaican sound systems and reggae techniques are what gave American hip-hop its tools for creation.

In the article "*'Represent': Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music*" by Murray Forman, located in *The Hip Hop Reader* by Tim Strode and Tim Wood, the topic of posse is discussed. The term *posse* is defined as a "strong force or company" when thinking about groups like N.W.A. and The Sugarhill Gang, or, in today's time, groups like the Migos. Originally, posses were groups such as gangs that would fight social and political problems within Jamaica. When this idea of a strong group came to America, it became a way for people to have a group to call home away from home, a group of people who share an identity and a common ideology about what they want to say and how.

Once hip-hop was established using reggae and Jamaican culture, it continued to spread like wildfire. The East and West Coasts were established and were affected differently. While the East had Caribbean culture present with its scratching and heavy beats, the West had Mexican influence with iconic lowriders and gangster rap. Later on, the South made a name for itself with the term "Dirty South" and its funk and groovy sound.

There is one group of people that is also completely overlooked when it comes to hip-hop: Puerto Rican people. Puerto Ricans have always been present in the creation of hip-hop. *Nuyorican* is the term

used for a New York Puerto Rican. In the article “*Puerto Rican and Proud, Boyee!*” by Juan Flores, located in *The Hip Hop Reader* by Tim Strode and Tim Wood, the relationship between Latinos (mainly Puerto Ricans) and hip-hop is explored. New York has a long history of Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods and relationships. It only makes sense that this Caribbean culture would have a touch on the origins of hip-hop. Graffiti and breaking were heavily influenced by *boricuas* (people descended from or born in Puerto Rico). Latin people have continued to influence music even to this day. Spanglish (Spanish and English combined) can be heard in songs, along with reggaeton beats.

Reggaeton is a style of music that has been directly influenced by both reggae and American hip-hop. Daddy Yankee is one artist who is recognized worldwide as a reggaeton rapper and has earned the name “King of Reggaeton.” Hip-hop has also influenced other genres, such as R&B (Rhythm and Blues) and neo-soul.

Now, returning to Caribbean influence on hip-hop, it is important to look not only at the techniques and elements of hip-hop, but also at the people who were able to influence hip-hop through their Caribbean identity. The New Jersey based American hip-hop group known as the Fugees was one of the first groups to showcase Caribbean culture in their music. The group consisted of Wyclef Jean, Pras Michel, and Lauryn Hill. Jean and Pras were Haitian-American, while Lauryn Hill was African American but often described as “Haitian by association.” Wyclef Jean is the artist I will focus on for the sake of length.

Wyclef Jean Presents The Carnival Featuring Refugee Allstars was Jean’s first solo album. This album is powerful because it includes Cuban influence, Haitian influence, and even songs entirely in Haitian Creole. A hip-hop album that included not only rap and Latin influence but also told a story filled with Haitian culture was something rarely seen at the time. Wyclef was one of the first artists who many Caribbean people felt truly represented a population that was either ignored or spoken down upon.

American hip-hop is not as straightforward as many people want to believe. This genre of music had to come from somewhere, and it had to be influenced by other cultures, and it was. Latin America, Africa, and, as discussed in this essay, the Caribbean all had a hand in the beginnings of hip-hop. Once American hip-hop gained popularity, it also went on to influence other genres, continuing the cycle of cultural exchange. *Hegemonic* is not a word that can accurately describe American hip-hop, as it can never be truly superior. There are too many moving pieces and forms of expression.

WORKS CITED

Forman, Murray. “‘Represent’: *Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music.*” *The Hip Hop Reader*, edited by Tim Wood, Pearson, 2008, pp. 196–205.

Flores, Juan. “*Puerto Rican and Proud, Boyee!*” *The Hip Hop Reader*, edited by Tim Wood, Pearson, 2008, pp. 30–39.

Board, Jamie Ann. “*The Dread Library.*” “Very Significant, but Little Appreciated Outside New York’s Caribbean Community at the Time, Was the Introduction of the Jamaican ‘Sound System’ Style to the City’s Party-Going Mix,” debate.uvm.edu/dreadlibrary/board.html.