

How Hip-Hop Rose to Be The Most Popular Genre in America

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## Musical Examples

**HUMBLE**

Composers: Kendrick Lamar (Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, born July 17, 1987), Ashton Terrence Hogan, Michael Williams II

Lyricist: Kendrick Lamar

Larger Work: DAMN.

Date Composed: 2017

Performers: Kendrick Lamar

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gx6xnVQuFzw>

**Fake Love**

Composers: Drake (Aubrey Drake Graham, born Oct 24, 1986), Leon Huff, Gene McFadden, John Whitehead, Adam King Feeney, Brittany Tali Hazzard, Anderson Hernandez

Lyricist: Drake

Larger Work: More Life

Date Composed: 2017

Performers: Drake

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9o6HN9pQXY>

**Let You Down**

Composers: NF (Nate Feuerstein born March 30, 1991), Tommee Profitt, David Garcia

Lyricist: NF

Larger Work: Perception

Date Composed: 2017

Performers: NF

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0501BTnbrxg>

In 2017, Hip-Hop/R&B takes the lead as the most listened to genre in the US since July, beating rock by nearly 4% (Nielsen 31). According to sales and streaming equivalents reported by Nielsen, Hip-Hop/R&B takes up 24.5% of total consumption (sales and equivalent streams), dominating mostly in on demand streams (31). However, this was not much of a surprise with their same report back in 2014 where streaming was still on the rise and 28.5% of Hip-Hop/R&B's total consumption was 28.5% compared to 24.7% with rock (Nielsen 2). Nielsen was not the only to realize this trend. A study done in London analyzed music popularity between 1960-2010 and shows that Hip-Hop/R&B's rise between 1980-2000s (Mauch). The reason for this shift, specifically for hip-hop, is due to mainly 3 causes that industry professionals observe and analysts back with study and research. Hip-Hop adaptability to the ever-changing environment in technological advancements in music distribution, lyricism and narrative in the past decade and how its musical elements appeal to the new audience in the 2010s.

## **Background & History**

To first understand hip-hop's rise, there needs to be a base understanding of its beginnings especially with the progression of the genre in the past decade. Hip-hop actually refers to the culture behind the music genre where it splits into four elements, rap, graffiti, breakdancing and DJing (Robinson). In terms of this paper, hip-hop will be referring to its rap and DJing elements of hip-hop culture that helped form what most people view it as in the music industry today. R&B or Rhythm and Blues is the foundation of any type of hip-hop music that later emerged in the 1970s (Rabaka 48). During the post-world war America, R&B emerged from African American soul songs and is characterized with their experiences in a "post-enslavement, urbanization and segregation society" (Rabaka 48). As a hip-hop artist who grew

up in the very beginnings of this culture, Lecrae says it best “Hip-hop was an audio documentary...it was communicating our story and what we were going through” (“Heroes and Villains: Is hip-hop a cancer or a cure?” 11:28 - 11:44).

The start of R&B began in 1938 when Louis Jordan & the Tympany 5 began recording and performing “lighthearted” songs with with that social commentary of African Americans at the time (Rabaka 49-50). Eventually, this evolved into Jump Blues, which was characterized by blues and jazz feels with half-sung, half-spoken performances filled with narratives on their radical oppression and impoverished situations from the late 1930s to the early 1940s (Rabaka 51). This would later carry onto the start of hip-hop music by what most historians refer to as “old school rap” in the 1970s and 1980s. Artists like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (Rabaka 51) who still brought out the difficulty of living city life in his lyrics, but also new beats while DJing for his audience (Robinson). When Ronald Reagan entered his presidency and cracked down on the war on drugs in 1982, this crushed African Americans even more in their social and economic situations. The next year, unemployment skyrocketed to 21% in urban communities and with the CIA fueling aid to central and South America (who trafficked drugs back into the US), selling drugs became a job for most African Americans as a viable solution for achieving the American Dream (Lecrae 7:21-11:14). This is when the hip-hop became known for being a genre that encouraged drugs, murders, and overall “gangster” life (Lecrae 7:21-11:14) which was the key to scoring a record deal and escaping the ghettos in the 90s and 00s (McNulty-Finn). Using these personas, 90s rappers, like Lil Wayne, Tupac and Jay-Z, were able to reach those suffering in the ghettos (Lecrae 7:21-11:14), but also prevented them from spreading past this audience(McNulty-Finn).

## **Technology & Distribution**

Those who are driving this change in the most popular genre are hypothesized by many experts in the streaming industry to be the Youth (Ugwu). In 2017, “the music industry has shifted to a ... streaming-focused model” (Ugwu) with over half of all music consumption through streaming (Nielsen, 31). For Hip-Hop/R&B specifically, 69% of its consumption are from services like Pandora, Spotify and iTunes (Nielsen, 31). The average age for these streaming services are 32, 28 and 34 respectively (Ugwu). Ken Parks from Spotify says “many 18-to-24-year-olds eat, sleep and breathe hip-hop” (Ugwu). The emergence of smart phones with stronger internet connection to social media and streaming services and the genre’s wide availability online to its predominant users (the youth) is the partial cause for Hip-Hop’s success.

Streaming technology is relatively new, with its beginnings in the 90s and how data was transferred over the internet. After innovation, it is now faster than ever providing on-demand services to those who have the proper device and connection. In general, there are two types of downloads that occur: progressive and streaming (Harris). Traditionally, progressive downloads used to be the way anyone could listen to music on-the-go and it would require them to download the full music file from the store (like iTunes) or a website before being able to listen (Harris). In today’s modern age, streaming breaks up the music file into small pieces and downloads the file as a user listens and deletes the file after the user is done with it. This is why users are able to listen almost immediately after pressing play (Wilson). The only limitation is that it requires a quick enough connection speed of at least 2 megabits per second (Harris). Free music is available on these streaming services only because of its paying users for premium services and ad revenue (Griffith).

Part of hip-hop music culture is the use of mixtapes, which is essentially “free-music” (Ugwu). Prior to streaming services, there were sites like LiveMixtapes where anyone could progressively download music for free (Ugwu). With the force of 87% of 16-to-24 year-olds who own smartphones and 47% of that same group streaming music (Audience Net 13, 23), acquiring and sharing music has become easier than ever. Levitin describes music as a large part of social bonding and seeking identity, especially during teenage years (232). It has become a social activity nowadays with 27% of hip-hop listeners who discuss music with their friends (Ugwu). Streaming services also play a part in pushing music towards the youth by providing playlists by editors who use data and “gut-feeling” to push new music (Dredge). The impact is shown through NF’s *Let You Down* where most of its success was from the US. Spotify’s Nordic team placed it on a “smaller pop playlist in ...Nordic territories” and eventually moved to Today’s Top Hits reaching five million streams worldwide (Dredge).

### **Preference and Musical Element Appeal**

Now that who’s been causing the change has been established, it’s worth noting to look at why this age group isn’t looking for other music elsewhere. If providing free music across all platforms and marketing it to the youth was all it took for any genre artist to become successful, hip-hop would likely not be at the top given its longstanding bad reputation of violence and drugs (MNI Targeted Media 6). Beyond just good marketing and culture, lies the music preferences and music popularity in that group. According to Levitin, music preferences really start when music becomes too simplistic or too complex for individual listeners (235). The degree of complexity and any characteristics of a song (rhythm, pitch, dynamic range) varies given an individual’s experiences and their reaction to it (Levitin 234). Though preference varies

from each listener, key characteristics of hip-hop such as tempo and its ability to mix in different genres within its own genre.

One key characteristic of hip-hop music is the fast-paced tempo that compliments the deep bass and back track for multiple rap songs throughout history. Listeners in the age group between 11<sup>th</sup> grade and college (roughly 16-to-22 year-olds) actually prefer faster tempos; as songs increase in tempo, preference increases as well (LeBlanc 165). Even though this study used mid 1900s jazz-pop samples and could affect results if applied to other genres, the intention was for the subjects to not recognize the songs and solely focus on the tempo (LeBlanc 157, 160). Similarly, HUMBLE, Let You Down and Fake Love tend to fall into the faster paced songs of Billboard's Top 100 (refer to Table 1) and possess at least an allegro tempo between 134 to 150 beats per minute (bpm).

Additionally, with hip-hop's incorporating new genres like pop in the past decade, rap has allowed itself to appeal to a wider audience (McNulty-Finn). Ally Reid from FLY 92.3 and Rauily Ramirez from Billboard's Hip-Hop chart agree that the line between rap and other genres have really "broken away" because of the increase in collaborations (McNulty-Finn). This can be seen more in Let You Down and Fake Love than in HUMBLE. Let You Down still has the dominant beat and percussive vocals that classifies it as hip-hop, but fuses pop and singer/songwriter themes by adding the melodic chorus and high pitched, electronic accompaniment and soft piano chords respectively. Fake Love's album, More Life was written with Jamaican influences and supports the collaboration idea by having at least 16 other artists collaborate with Drake (Cheung). Fake Love specifically uses the dancehall themes by incorporating the hallow, open pianos with the crunchy drum timbres usually found in tracks by Sean Paul (dancehall artist). HUMBLE aligns with the more traditional hip-hop sounds with the

more energetic beat and keyboard and synthesizer sounds. Another preference to note, not specifically for the youth, but for the Western population overall are consonant harmonies and deep bass sounds. Because all three examples were produced with Western artists, they all incorporate consonant harmony that is a normal preference across all 21<sup>st</sup> century American citizens (Coghlan). All examples also bring in the monophonic texture of hip-hop with the backbeat providing one line of melody and having the voice act as the main percussive element of the song. Fake Love differs a bit here with the dancehall influences (Cheung), inserting a homophonic chorus that has his voice singing and the main hook acting as accompaniment.

### **Preference, Lyrics and Narrative**

The trend in mainstream music today is more about “how well [a track’s] message resonates with a typical person” according to Will (McNulty-Finn). Hip-hop has always been about storytelling and sincerity and when artists don’t maintain their stories, they are not likely to have success (McNulty-Finn). Listeners are looking for something different as history presents the rise and fall of different chord progressions and timbres over the past half-century (Mauch).

Lyrically, hip-hop has made strides to push itself away from the violent themes presented in the 90s. With streaming becoming a dominant player in the game, according to industry experts, it is no longer a requirement for hip-hop artists to craft and maintain a hard persona followed by getting signed by a major record label (McNulty-Finn). Because of this, artists have more creative freedom to form their own persona and rather than writing about the “ghetto life”, they can rap about anything from religion, sexuality and “gentler approach(es) towards romance” (McNulty-Finn). As mentioned before, this change in the past decade had done nothing but helped boost their popularity. Reportedly, Hip-Hop/R&B still leans more towards the “Street Cred” topic, but any



song that lyrically leans away from its genre's main topic was shown to be "more popular" (Berger 1179).

This change can be seen in HUMBLE, Fake Love and Let You Down. Starting with HUMBLE, there is a bit of mystery that shrouds the intentions of the song, but its overall message is in the title and opposes the rap industry's usual modern message (McNulty-Finn). While there are still themes of the idea of bragging about his success, Lamar is really getting at reflecting on himself as a person given his success in the past years (Newstead). Lamar is known to have a tough background being raised in Compton with the west coast drug gang in his backyard, but he differs from most because of his ability to write observant and authentic lyrics inspired by his background, especially in To Pimp a Butterfly (Biography.com Editors). Fake Love, on the other hand, is loud and clear about Drake's sincere dislike for people who have false respect for him only because of his success. Raised in a musical family and gaining exposure with his start as a child star in *Degrassi: Next Generation*, Drake used his opportunities to rise into a successful career, constantly topping charts and making headlines year after year. His story proves that industry success can derive from other places besides the ghetto and supports the idea of authenticity rather than crafting a "gangsta" persona just for the industry. Let You Down is even more personalized with NF addressing the drowning feeling of not measuring up to expectations that originate from himself and potentially others ("Mike Interviews NF" 3:15-4:00). NF's background is shrouded more in loss with having both parental figures disappear from his early life (Leggett). Rather than talking about his success or rise to it, though many of his songs do have these themes, NF is known for his ability to self-reflect and pull his listeners in with a vulnerability that defies the usual masculine themes of hip-hop. Lyrically, these songs have different messages that are a far cry from the general 90s hip-hop songs.

These examples are a clear reflection of the change hip-hop underwent in the recent years. Musically, they incorporate hip-hop's fast paced tempo, but draws in influences from other genres and artists to make a new sound that so many listeners want to find. From a lyrical and narrative standpoint, all the artists (Lamar, Drake and NF) have vastly different backgrounds and personas but have high success in the mainstream music and streaming realms. Lastly, all the musical examples have ranked in the top 15 positions of Billboard's Hot 100. Though NF's success can't be compared to the history of Drake and Lamar, he is a rising artist that has already reached mainstream listeners and is an example of how streaming has contributed towards his success.

Hip-hop has endured so much change, but is, according to Will, emerging as a leader in the music industry that is "opening up their [listener's] ears to the genre" (McNulty-Finn). With streaming and mobile technology, authentic, atypical lyrics of modern hip-hop artists and the blend of core hip-hop and other genre musical elements, hip-hop was able to make it to the top in the music industry. Additionally, its dominance just getting started on its pathway to success. As Will says, "hip-hop is here to stay" (McNulty-Finn).

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Table 1: BPMs for Top 5 Songs Billboard Top 100s Chart

2017

Song	Artist	BPM
Bodak Yellow	Cardi B	125
Rockstar	Post Malone	160
Look What You Made Me Do	Taylor Swift	128
1-800-273-8255	Logic	100
Despacito	Luis Fonsi & Daddy Yankee Ft. Justin Bieber	178

2018

Song	Artist	BPM
Girls Like You	Maroon 5 Ft. Cardi B	125
Mona Lisa	Lil Wayne Ft. Kendrick Lamar	122
Lucid Dreams	Juice WRLD	84
Better Now	Post Malone	145
Don't Cry	Lil Wayne Ft. XXXTENTACION	112