

Svadrut Kukunooru
AFROAMER 154
Rap Year Book Paper
May 5, 2024

2017's Rap Year Book

In the constantly evolving hip-hop scene, every year delivers a couple of songs that rise above simple entertainment and make a permanent imprint on the culture. *The Rap Year Book* by Shea Serrano endeavors to compile these songs from every year since the birth of hip-hop in 1979. Since *The Rap Year Book* concludes in 2014, we will help finish it by analyzing the songs that were most relevant to the evolution of hip-hop in 2017. Among these are Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow", an explicit, catchy anthem that shattered records and redefined possibilities for women in the rap game; Lil Uzi Vert's "XO Tour Llif3", an instant classic for Generation Z that popularized the new subgenre of emo rap; and finally Kendrick Lamar's "DNA.", a blistering display of lyrical prowess and social commentary that helped Lamar win the first Pulitzer Prize for rap. Through an analysis of these songs' themes, contexts, and cultural impact, as well as comparisons to earlier trailblazing songs in the hip-hop genre, we will shed light on the complex intersections between music, society, and identity.

Cardi B grew up Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar in the South Bronx. She has said that she was a gang member with the Bloods as young as age 16, and lived a turbulent early life until she started stripping. Cardi B has talked about the positive effect stripping has had on her life, saying "[Stripping] really saved me from a lot of things. When I started stripping I went back to school." (CentricTV). She's stated that stripping helped her get out of poverty after she was kicked out of her mother's house. However, she's also said that she doesn't recommend this path for women,

saying how it caused self-image issues and needless cosmetic surgery. “Bodak Yellow”, her rap debut, is a rejection of her past and a celebration of her wealth today. Cardi raps about how she now controls the money around her now, unlike when she was a stripper -- “I don't dance now, I make money moves (Ayy, ayy) / Say I don't gotta dance, I make money move” and uses her thousand-dollar Louboutin heels as a metaphor for her reputation as an aggressive MC -- “These expensive, these is red bottoms, these is bloody shoes”. Today, these subjects might seem played out in hip-hop -- flexing one’s wealth and penchant for violence is ubiquitous in most hip-hop songs today -- but back in 2017, the fact that a song like this was rapped by a woman was revolutionary. “Bodak Yellow” was the first hip-hop song by a female MC to top the Billboard charts since Lauryn Hill’s “Doo Wop (That Thing)” in 1998. It also became the first song by a female rapper to spend multiple weeks at the top of the chart, and the first record by a female rapper to be certified Diamond status by the RIAA. “Bodak Yellow” opened the doors for other female artists of color like Megan Thee Stallion and Doja Cat to dominate the hip-hop industry. Most importantly, “Bodak Yellow” became an anthem for people with a coloured past like Cardi’s, and proof that people that looked and talked like her could achieve the American Dream. Briana Younger of Pitchfork succinctly sums up the songs’ impact: “[Bodak Yellow] emboldened many of the people—especially women of color—who were marginalized for the very things that anchor the Afro-Latina star’s impenetrable pride.” (Pitchfork).

Lil Uzi Vert, born Symere Woods, emerged from the Philadelphia rap scene with a unique blend of influences, from rock icon Marilyn Manson to hip-hop pioneer Pharrell. This, along with Uzi’s unique “nerdy” bars and XXL Freshman Class co-sign ensured that their mark on the hip-hop scene would be era-defining -- and it was. “XO Tour Llif3”, released as part of their

debut album *Luv is Rage 2*, peaked at number seven on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and currently has over 2 billion streams, remaining Uzi's most iconic song. "XO Tour Llif3" pioneered the subgenre of emo hip-hop due to its frequent references to suicide and emotional breakdowns, allowing for future emo rappers like XXXTentacion and Juice Wrld to popularize the genre with number-one songs like "?" and "Lucid Dreams". Although the creation of emo rap is originally credited to Michigan rapper Bones, lyrics referencing suicide like "She said 'Baby I am not afraid to die' / Push me to the edge / All my friends are dead" were never in the mainstream until this song. "XO Tour Llif3" offered the hip-hop genre an alternative to the exorbitant themes popularized by Drake and Future. On a more personal note, this song got me through high school -- though Uzi raps about his tumultuous relationships and substance abuse, I related to it because of my loneliness from moving to a different school, leaving all my friends behind ("All my friends are dead"). Its virality was also something special, spawning one of the first TikTok dance challenges (#LilUziVertChallenge) that helped make songs like Drake's "In My Feelings" extremely popular in the future, and changed the reason for songs becoming popular in our generation. This song was also a sign of what future music was going to look like; Uzi's genre-bending of hip-hop and emo elements foreshadowed the diversity prevalent in hip-hop today, with songs like Travis Scott's SICKO MODE blending elements of trap, psychedelic rock, and electronic music to become the longest-charting song in hip-hop history and the only number-one hit in the 2010s to have a key change. D.R. of *Billboard* sums it up -- "'XO Tour Llif3' managed to capture the zeitgeist of the youth in a way that few have come close to over the past few years". (Billboard)

When people are asked about the greatest rappers of all time, Kendrick Lamar almost always comes up in the conversation. He is the only person outside of the classical and jazz genres to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his music, and his distinct use of social commentary and political criticism in his songs have arguably changed the minds of a generation. From *good kid, m.a.a.d city* to *To Pimp a Butterfly* to his recent flurry of diss tracks against Drake, Lamar's lyrical prowess cannot be understated -- he is a genius. Nowhere is this more apparent than the album that won him a Pulitzer -- the 2017 14-track album *D.A.M.N.* You don't even have to listen to the album to see its effect -- it won Lamar a Pulitzer and has been referenced as one of the greatest albums of all time. Although *To Pimp a Butterfly* arguably has a deeper focus on the social problems plaguing the country, *D.A.M.N.* serves hard-hitting beats combined with lyrical wordplay that can't be matched. I could pick any song on this album for my rap yearbook entry for 2017, but I will focus on *DNA.*, one of the most popular songs on the album. Although it was not marketed as a single for the album, it still received radio plays after the music video was released. On *DNA.*, K-Dot focuses on his own Black identity -- celebrating it, criticizing it, and exploring its different aspects. Lamar's goal with the song was to make it sound like "chaos", and Mike Will Made It, the song's producer, appropriately made the song "sound like [Kendrick's] battling the beat". The lyrics also represent Lamar's battle with his own identity -- he raps "loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA" while also spitting lines like "Cocaine quarter piece, got war and peace inside my DNA" (referencing his family's ties with dealing cocaine) and "I got dark, I got evil that rot inside my DNA / I got off, I got troublesome heart inside my DNA" (implying he's got off for solving crimes and he has an evil side to him). He also addresses criticisms of his lyrics on "Alright", interspersing the comments of FOX News anchor Geraldo Rivera in his chorus -- "I-I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA / *This is why I say*

that hip hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years / I-I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA”.

The music video reveals another facet of this song -- we find out that DNA actually stands for “Dead N****r Association”. Additionally, the lyrics of the song are used as an argument between Don Cheadle playing a government employee -- possibly referencing the industrial police complex that the Black Lives Matter movement rails against -- and Kendrick Lamar in handcuffs in the stereotypical criminal role. Between them is a lie detector that goes off whenever they are rapping, implying that anything a black man says is automatically discounted. The government employee and K-Dot are both linked by their past experiences and through their oppression as Black people -- in other words, they are connected through their DNA. (Youtube)

Through Cardi B's proud display of the American Dream, Lil Uzi Vert's fusion of influences to create genre-defying tracks, and Kendrick Lamar's introspection of Black identity, we have witnessed the transformative power of hip-hop to amplify marginalized voices, challenge entrenched norms, and unite disparate communities. “Bodak Yellow” opened hip-hop for female artists, and their popularity can be seen in chart-topping hits like “WAP” and “Thot Shit”. “XO Tour Llif3” introduced emo to a new generation and made genre-bending mainstream. Finally, “DNA.” helped bring rap’s potential for social commentary to our generation. Hip-hop is one of the fastest evolving genres, and 2024’s hip-hop sounds different from songs made just 7 years ago. I’m excited to see what the future brings. :)

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