

Reflections on Teaching Music 17: Hip Hop

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“What you hear is not a test,” Wonder Mike’s opening disclaimer on the iconic “Rapper’s Delight,” was already unnecessary by the time I was an adolescent. A test? Of course it’s not a test! Nobody from my generation would mistake rapping for a mic check; for us the sound of someone rhyming over a vamp had been tested and proven. Widely regarded as the “first” hip hop record,¹ the Sugar Hill Gang’s 1979 single brought the art form of Hip Hop into the mainstream, which is where it has remained pretty much ever since. For people my age and younger, Hip Hop has always been simply the sound of American popular music. It was a sound I consumed enthusiastically throughout my childhood.

I was, in other words, a white kid who loved Hip Hop, the subject occasionally called out in Bakari Kitwana’s *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race In America* (Kitwana 2005). Today I am something else that Kitwana calls out: the instructor, this Spring, of an undergraduate course on Hip Hop (Music 17: “Hip Hop”). In a way the class requires the defamiliarization of the Hip Hop sound we know so well; students are expected by the end of the class to think of Hip Hop not simply as the sound of popular music, but as a sound originating in a particular time and place, evolving in dramatic ways over the decades, developing certain existent cultural practices and innovating others. But of course most students sign up for it simply because it is a chance to lavish time on some of the music they love most. As a result the course is extremely popular and, it must be said, valuable to the department.

The first thing I want to say about this course is that it has been extraordinarily challenging, rewarding and fun. I have grown as a teacher because of it. And, above all, I have been humbled by the seriousness of my students’ engagement with the material. They listen to Hip Hop with joy and attention. They care about its relationship to the historical trends with which it evolved. They read rap lyrics with intensity and insight, laughing at the jokes, taking seriously the critiques, and grappling with the sometimes problematic themes. They nod their heads in time to the music I play during lecture. They approach me indignant at the things my syllabus leaves off. In short, students care about the art form of Hip Hop, and so they are easy to teach.

Because students are so engaged, it is also easy to demand a lot from them. An example of a moment where this worked well was at the close of the first unit, which broadly traces the transition of Hip Hop from a subcultural form local to the South Bronx to a nationwide phenomenon of mass commercial appeal. It is the transition from the block party to the recording studio, the turntable to the sampler, and from call-and-response improvisation to the intricate textual density recognizable to contemporary listeners as rap. The best case study for that last turn is Erik B and Rakim, whose 1988 “Follow the Leader” exhibits groundbreaking lyrical complexity. We listened to the track and then did a close reading of some of the lyrics:

Brothers tried and others died to get the formula
But I'mma let you sweat, you still ain't warm, you're a
Step away from frozen stiff as if you're posin'

Why, I ask my students, is the person sweating even while not warm? The answer to this question takes a while to arrive at as a class, and unlocks a delightful chain of ludic syntax: warm as in close to finding something you seek, namely, the formula for imitating Rakim's flow, which the addressed person has no hope of finding and is thus left to sweat despite being a step away from frozen. Thus, he or she is not “warm” but still sweating. He or she is also stiff, which is unattractive and the opposite of the svelte Rakim, and, implicitly, he or she is a poser, an inauthentic imitator. With charm and precision, these three quick lines sound many broader themes from the course: they enact the cultural practice of the Dozens, they hit upon the theme of authenticity, and they signal the transition of Hip Hop from a party music to a high art and vital form of truth telling—to what Chuck D famously characterizes as “Black CNN.”

Even on the page, divorced from much of what animates them, these lyrics reward close reading. Note, for example, the way Rakim leaves ambiguous the syntactical function of “stiff.” Is it “a step away from frozen stiff” or “a step away from frozen // stiff as if you're posin'”? Rakim doesn't require that you decide. There is truly no right answer, which is always a lovely thing in poetry. It's a small example but as I raised it in lecture, I remembered another verse I happen to have taught in which a word is similarly left ambiguous:

Diffugient comites et nocte tegentur opaca:
speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem
devenient.

This is the *Aeneid*, IV.122–125, a text which many of my students will have read in their various first year Humanities seminars, and the crucial word is *dux*, “leader.” Except that my students will have encountered it in Allen Mandelbaum’s 1971 translation:

The scattered train of Tyre, the youth of Troy,
and Venus’ Dardan grandson in alarm
seek different shelters through the fields; the torrents
roar down the mountains. Dido and the Trojan chieftan
have reached the same cave. (Mandelbaum 1971, 84)

There is a great classics chestnut contained in this passage, describing the moment when Dido and Aeneas first have sex. Much of the pathos that will attend their coming breakup centers on who led whom into that cave—to which noun, that is, *dux* is in apposition. Dido feels deceived; Aeneas feels that he never entered into such contracts. Knowing who led, who initiated their lovemaking, would seem to be the dispositive question. In English, you have to choose one, rendering a judgment on which one of the lovers is culpable. Or, you can punt by abandoning the concept of “leading” altogether (Mandelbaum chooses this course, simply making Aeneas into a “chieftain”). In Latin, however, the text can remain at once grammatically sound and fundamentally undecided. The reader literally has to decide themselves which of the pair is the *dux*.

It’s a fascinating and beautiful moment. But of course none of that is available in translation, and, perhaps more importantly, none of it matters if you haven’t formed an emotional connection with Dido and Aeneas. And for that to happen, there are a thousand other kinds of translation that first have to take place, translations that are not linguistic and for which neither teacher nor student usually has time.

I think the point of teaching Virgil today is that it is a sort of training ground, a complex literary text that can spur students to read closely and about which they can write in formal English; the idea that the text is so “great” that everyone just has to read it is, by now, pretty outmoded. But, as anyone who has taught Virgil knows, as a training ground it does not usually deliver. Doing a close reading of Rakim with 400 students, I realized that his language reminded me of no one’s more than Virgil, and as a training ground it was working *really* well. The techniques of close reading my students were performing before my eyes were exactly what I had tried (and, often, failed) to accomplish when I was helping students write about Virgil.

It may seem obvious to argue that the Western canon is obsolete, and that humanities curricula would benefit from being open to a greater

diversity of cultural production. The very fact that the Hip Hop course exists, after all, shows that the argument has already been made successfully. The reason I make it here, though, is that before I actually taught a course in popular music, I had not fully appreciated how right the argument is. I think we can take it for granted today that European music and literature have no special claim on our university curricula; they're not "better," obviously. Yet, it is possible to believe that emphatically and still fail to grasp just how much more productive our classes can be when we teach things that students are interested in. Before teaching the Hip Hop course, I can say that personally I did not really grasp this.

In light of my experience teaching Hip Hop, other courses I have taught begin to look different. For example, in "The History of Music in Western Culture," I taught my students about Schubert's predilection for the flat submediant, the evocative move from I to \flat VI. This harmonic device induces the characteristic Romantic "trance" and bears an arcane relation to the ideological polemics of the "absolute music" idea (see Taruskin 2005). Some of my students had grown up playing Western Art Music and responded positively to this lesson, but others bristled against having to study this stuff. Some even cited Harvard's recent curricular overhaul, which eliminates traditional theory and history requirements altogether. I heard these complaints sympathetically then, but after teaching Hip Hop, I have come to think of such requirements as the musical equivalents of the *dux* trick in the Virgil cited above: European arcana of undeniable interest, enduring prestige and waning pedagogical value. I take it for granted that, especially in large survey courses like Hip Hop, the point is not the acquisition of knowledge *per se*, but the acquisition of skills—reading skills, research skills, aural skills, etc. So the real question, in many cases, is, what material best facilitates the acquisition of those skills? The answer does not often lie in the Western canon.

All of which to say, I benefited enormously from the opportunity to teach the Hip Hop course, and I believe I gave my students something of value. However, there are also disturbing contradictions latent in my role as a teacher of Hip Hop. For one thing, I am a white person teaching a form of music produced almost exclusively by black artists. The successes of the movement to de-center the Western canon, one of whose fruits is this course, has had the paradoxical effect of sometimes placing Hip Hop under the institutional care of people like me—a fan, but by no means a member of the Hip Hop community. What right do I have, at such a remove from actual Hip Hop culture, to decide what receives institutional sanction as its true history? Who am I to define its theoretical terms, interpret its lyrics? Is not my Hip Hop listening doomed to be listening from without, a kind of

projection shaped in the grotesque image of American racial hierarchies, a classic example of what Tricia Rose calls “listening in?” (Rose 1994, 5). While allowing that white people’s enjoyment of Hip Hop may be genuine, Rose argues that “listening in” may contribute to a kind of “dilution,” a thought that makes me feel no small amount of shame. As a matter of fact, I felt a lot of shame as a teacher of this course; for example, when speaking about the deprivation of the 1970s South Bronx as a person who has never had to live in a ghetto. Or, when talking about Afrofuturism; for as much as I may admire the ambition of Sun Ra’s musical cosmology, I know as a white person I am probably doomed to misrepresent it. Or, in general, any time when I had to be an intellectual authority on a music I can’t make or a culture I don’t belong to. For all the wonderful things this course gave me, I am not sure I ever should have been offered the chance to teach it.

Another problem is that I have no formal qualifications as a Hip Hop expert. Despite the ambivalence about the institution in Hip Hop studies, such qualifications do exist. Tessa Brown, for example, has written a dissertation examining the usage of Hip Hop to teach writing (Brown 2017), while A.D Carson’s dissertation, a 34-track web archive of academically engaged music, is *Hip Hop* (Carson 2017). If there is any party in the debate over Hip Hop in the institution that we would expect to insist upon credentialization, it would be the institution itself. The course is premised upon the recognition of Hip Hop’s equal artistic standing, but in reality formal expertise does not seem to be a requirement to teach it (these things take time, of course, and a recent hire is actually a Hip Hop performer). It’s hard to picture the situation inverted, with a “fan” trying his or her hand at *The History of Music in Western Culture*.

Nor is it even clear that the person in charge of this course should be a “musician” at all. Consider the three texts often regarded as foundational to Hip Hop studies: Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise* (Rose 1994), Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* (Chang 2005), and the edited collection *That’s the Joint! The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (Murray and Neal 2004). Neither of the first two are written by musicians, and while musicians do contribute to the edited volume, they are in the minority. Perhaps, then, a Hip Hop course offered by a music department should focus on the music’s formal properties. An intriguing possibility, but one complicated by the paucity of such analysis in the field, where the majority of scholarship focuses on the text. What constitutes musical “form” in Hip Hop is a difficult and unresolved question, one to which I could only make tentative answers for my own purposes as I prepared this course.

One of the reasons the course is so consistently popular is that it satisfies the “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” requirement for UCSD under-

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graduates. Instituted in 2011, this requirement states that every candidate for a Bachelor's degree must take one course from an approved list of DEI courses. As this requirement is worded on the undergraduate education site,

A knowledge of diversity, equity, and inclusion is required of all candidates for a Bachelor's degree. (UCSD Undergrad Ed. Site)

These values are defined in greater detail elsewhere on the site:

Diversity refers to the variety of personal experiences, values, and worldviews that arise from differences of culture and circumstance. **Equity** is the guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all students, faculty, and staff. **Inclusion** is the act of creating environments in which any individual or group can feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued.

Did my class succeed in giving my students “knowledge” of these three pillars? Perhaps it did. But I cannot help but think that the institution's commitment to these values is insignificant compared with three questions raised about Hip Hop in the institution by Kitwana:

What is being taught? Who is teaching it? What will be the result? (Kitwana 2005, 105)

These questions trace a troubling crescendo, and when I read them, my inward answers sound stammering. What am I teaching? Hip Hop's history and some listening strategies, in as enjoyable and productive a way as I can. Who am I? A musician, an academic, a pianist, a lifelong lover of Hip Hop, a person with experience thinking critically about music. The result? Students with a deepened affection for music they already love, and an improved knowledge of 20th century American history.

These answers are real and I believe they represent at least some of what I achieved in the course. But they also feel incomplete. They offer an insecure foundation upon which to stand as a teacher of Hip Hop. They don't answer the core of Kitwana's questions, which are part of a broader discussion of the removal of Blackness from the face of Hip Hop:

This unspoken but growing trend to expunge Blackness from hip-hop is reinforced by the myth of hip-hop's primary white audience. The trend is emerging at the same time that hip-hop studies is entering the academy. Will it ensure that hip-hop scholars who are white fare better than those who are Black? (Kitwana 2005, 104)

This trenchant passage gives voice to the most unsettling contradictions of my role as a teacher of Hip Hop. I felt these contradictions acutely when these words were projected behind me as I lectured a room full of undergraduates about the upsetting situation in which we all found ourselves, but they were equally present in my many moments of pedagogical satisfaction, threatening to expose my enjoyment for what it is: a privilege. As Tricia Rose points out, my enjoyment of that privilege may well be sincere, but that does not necessarily make it just.

Notes

1. Of course, the truth is more complicated than that. There had been other rap singles before the 1979 Sugar Hill release, and the Sugar Hill Gang wasn't really a part of the South Bronx scene.

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