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How The National Embrace of Hip Hop Began It's Demise

The 1970s proved disastrous for inner cities and the urban civic structure. The time period was wrought with huge cuts in social spending and federal funding, further concentration of capital in the hands of the elite, the mechanization of the work force and new ideas of urban renewal that would deplete city cores of their resources, turning them into economic wastelands. New York's South Bronx became the poster child for the time period, as it went from an established economic and social community to a demolished ghetto. Urban planning and poor economic choices effectively gutted the city of its inhabitants and resources and replaced them with the broken infrastructure that would help give way to hip hop culture. Because of these widespread disadvantages and poor living conditions, the music/art/lifestyle of these people was infused with the frustrations, mechanizations, and harsh realities of their environment. Without the usual methods of identity formation and status attainment, youth in the South Bronx were left to create their own.

This paper will first trace the path of the South Bronx and its relation to the creation of hip hop, and detail how this collection of the downtrodden into a localized centrality allowed for a culture to be born. Then, the issue of the commodity of these art forms by the dominant white majority and it's relation to issues of quality and substance will be detailed, to ultimately postulate that the commercial embrace and eventual commodity of hip hop signaled its stagnation as an art form and moved its lyrical content from socio-political issues and toasts to a materialist-driven image.

Before this new lower class could be in place, the South Bronx's current population had to evacuate. Starting from the late 50s, a series of measures taken by New York officials ensured the demise of the area. Perhaps the most devastating of public policy and urban planning to the South Bronx was the work of urban developer Robert Moses. During the 1950s and 1960s Moses constructed the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which effectively cut the area in half. Designed to link New Jersey and Long Island, the bridge demolished all in its path, leaving valuable housing and commercial property empty, forcing many to relocate to other neighborhoods.

The second disastrous piece of legislature, the Title 1 Slum Clearance, was pushed by Moses and Senator Robert Taft in 1949 (www.pbs.org). Originally created to help find suitable housing for the post-war population boom, this piece of legislature resulted in displacing throngs of the poor. This legislature allowed the Federal Government to buy up plots of low-cost land, then sell it back to developers who would theoretically improve the property and sell it back to the lower class. Instead, developers removed all the initial inhabitants and built expensive homes and upper-class structures, forcing the relocation of over 170,000 people (Rose, 31) and effectively severing ties and disrupting kin groups.

All of these vacancies meant landlords were experiencing record losses, and insurance money provided them with an effective and financially sound way to end their financial woes. Burning down their apartment buildings would net them thousands of dollars in insurance money. As a result, during the mid-'70s, the South Bronx averaged 12,000 fires a year. The area lost some 40 percent of its housing stock, and 300,000 people fled (www.washingtonmonthly.com). Commercial ruin came in the form of large increases in the Personal Business and Property Taxes caused many business to close up shop and head for

cheaper areas, while the Federal Government further stratified the area by offering large subsidies to landlords who would house the influx of immigrants, which helped to usher in a new underclass to the area. A haphazard concentration of Hispanics, African Americans and immigrants of Caribbean descent replaced the tight-knit communities of Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants. The end result of this systematic gentrification is a diasporic community with no formal kin groups, no strong sense of community, and a lack of outlets for identity formation and a dearth of legitimate sources for status attainment.

Hip hop provided a legitimate answer to these needs. The main tenets of hip hop; deejaying, emceeing, breaking and graffiti provided the youths of the South Bronx the outlets for frustrations, creativity, status attainment and identity formation that the dominant culture denied them. This trend of the creation of an idiosyncratic art form as a response to the dominant hegemony is not new to hip hop, as other forms of African American expression such as Blues, Bebop and Jazz also worked in this paradigm. Hip hop's rapid growth during the mid 70s to early 1980s placed it on a level that could no longer afford to be ignored.

Around the late 1970s, graffiti became one of the main signifiers of urban decay and chaos for New York. Rather than infusing funds into the dilapidated civic structure, New York officials decided to crack down on graffiti in an attempt to regain symbolic control. Millions of dollars were poured into new chemical washes and security measures aimed at keeping the train cars free of markings. Although these actions partially slowed the speed and volume of graffiti works, the city's actions also publicly labeled graffiti as deviant behavior indicative of a new, notorious subculture. Along with help from the promoter and art student Fab Five Freddy, the SoHo art scene eagerly bought up this labeling and image. Galleries who were eager to present a street-smart and cutting-edge image latched onto works of graffiti artists, giving the art form a

short-lived legitimacy that ended up changing the meaning and contexts of the images. No longer an original, unhindered voice of a culture, the meanings and messages of graffiti were quickly becoming tools used by the creators of dominant culture for mass appeal and to lend products a signifier of street credibility.

The evolution of break dancing followed a path of exploitation similar to that of graffiti. Begun in the 1970s as a way to emphasize a DJ's break beat. Break dancers would form crews and engage in battles with other crews, both physically and using dance steps. Crews would represent a certain neighborhood, and belonging to one provided a certain level of status and a strong sense of identity and regional ties. In the early 1980s, a number of articles in reputable, mainstream publications brought breaking to the masses in a negative light by publishing articles that correlated breaking with police activity and antisocial behavior. These articles helped give rise to a social taboo about the dancers, guaranteeing them notoriety and popularity among hip downtown clubs eager to exploit the latest trends. Club owners would invite prominent breakers to attract a larger audience in order to gain more profit, rarely providing the breakers with substantial funds. Just like graffiti's emergence into mainstream culture, the entrance of breaking into the dominant lexicon and collective culture transformed the art form from a potent sub-cultural force to a signifier of urban hip-ness used to sell a lifestyle.

Society first heard of rap, hip hops most complex and malleable form, through the landmark "Rappers Delight" by the Sugar Hill Gang. Before long, record companies had spotted the trend and one by one devoured the smaller, independent labels. A tool once used for social critique and commentary aimed at the plight of a minority became a tool for selling units aimed at the predominantly white record-buying public. This rapid change in audience base created a rapid change in the narrative of rap music, shifting focus from the whim of the artist to the whim

of a conglomerate record company. The success of “Rappers Delight” effectively pushed rap into the mainstream where it would eventually stagnate, choking on the narrow vision and materialist obsessions of Record Companies and target-audiences.

The economic realities of the South Bronx from the 1950s to the 1970s created a gutted rotted civic infrastructure. Disastrous urban planning policies, huge decreases in social spending and laws that favored the rich created a highly stratified society. The gentrification of the Bronx created a condensed underclass of immigrants. Out of this diaspora, a lifestyle pattern that involved dee-jaying, emceeing, break dancing and rapping grew to fruition. Dubbed hip hop, this culture provided a voice to a collective who had been denied the usual means of political representation. These art forms reached their creative pinnacle in the late 70s and managed to reach commercial success. Although it’s commodification by dominant cultural institutions increased hip hop’s visibility and popularity, it ultimately watered down the message and content of these forms.