

*“Keep tryin’ to keep it real by keepin’ it raw, while half of y’all still be keepin’ it flawed,  
and all the real heads scream fu\*k hip-hop, til’ all this mediocre bullsh\*t stops...”*  
-Jakki da Motamouth -**“F\*\*k Hip-Hop”**

In class this year, there has been an ongoing discussion in regards to the idea of authenticity in hip-hop. Who’s keeping it real, who isn’t, and what that phrase even means has been brought up numerous times. Each student has a different view of the idea of being authentic, but the class was able to sum it up as best they could with one thought. Staying true to yourself was the best signifier of the authentic in hip-hop. To some students, the thought of staying true validated their disdain for commercial hip-hop. Some of their favorite artists don’t promote the gun toting, women disrespecting, ultra-bling images we see every day on MTV. They are more concerned with making hip-hop music because they love it. Enter the great debate: Commercial Hip-Hop versus Underground Hip-Hop. Chances are, if you’re a fan of rap music, you’ve been engaged in this discussion at some point in your life. The truth is that the spectrum is more than just two sides. Artists flip-flop all over the place, and the type of music they make doesn’t always coincide with the general beliefs attributed to both sub-genres of music. On top of all that, the relationship between commercial and underground is somewhat mutual, and in the end, they need each other for coexistence. This doesn’t apply only to the sounds of the two, but also the business aspects, in the artists own lives and as well as fans own beliefs as well.

Not to give a history of American music, but pop/mainstream music has been around for ages, but hip-hop itself is a young music and culture. With any type of music, be it rock, jazz or country, there are going to be people who prefer Creed, Kenny G and Shania Twain to Sunny Day Real Estate, Thelonious Monk and Hank Williams. Not to say the latter selection of artists are inherently ‘underground,’ but they are possibly lesser known than the former group listed. There’s a reason for that though. Record labels like to put out music that the majority of the public will enjoy. This is a tactic that conflicts with people who make music just because they love making

music. Artists in general love to make music, if not they wouldn't do it, but there are some artists who love to make music for themselves and won't change for any reason, and there are artists who make music and have no problem tweaking it to corporate standards to help them sell more copies. The ones who adhere to what the label desires (mainstream) get on TV and sell boatloads of albums whereas the ones that don't are usually left to put out their music themselves (underground) and don't sell nearly as much. In the past years, in hip hop especially, the aesthetic has changed for a lot of people. Granted there are still infinite MC's on the street trying to shop demos to the big labels, but musicians have been realizing the potential of the independent business. MC's are realizing they can record an album in their apartment and sell tens of thousands of copies. This isn't a new concept, artists have been doing that for years, and once they show labels the regional buzz for their music, they have a great shot at getting signed. Ludacris sold upwards of 50,000 copies of his album independently, which was a major factor in him getting signed to Def Jam South. The difference in now is that artists are realizing they can survive off of this 'do it yourself' instead of using it as a stepping stone to a major label. Looking at this concept in terms of business, there are both ups and downs to staying independent or going commercial. Staying indie means there are less people involved in your whole career as an artist and when you put out an album, you get more back per unit. Whereas major artists get from pennies to a dollar for every unit, indie MC's can get anywhere from four dollars and up for each unit sold. Though the monetary return per unit is greater for indie artists, their sells are usually much lower. If they are successful though, the lower sales are still enough to live off of. Indie artists also have the freedom to record where, when and with whom they choose. They can put out their record when they want, and can collaborate with other indie artists because they aren't locked into contracts where the label decides who you can work with and when your album drops.

*"Once I realized I could put a record out myself and sell 30,000 copies because it was a good record and then I make all that money back in my pocket, I felt like a criminal. I was looking at cats I know who, 'til this day, were still locked in a contract and they were like, 'Yeah, they're going to put my album out next year, I think...' I feel smarter and stronger than these motherfu\*\*ers. Just alter your idea of what it is to be successful. I like the idea that while everyone is scrambling, quietly cats are forming fan bases. It's been six years and now we can tour whenever we want to sold out shows. Okay, we're*

*not doing 20,000 seat venues. But we are doing 30 shows in a row with 2,000 people every night; guaranteed sold out, guaranteed sold product at the end of the show and all of a sudden, magazine will have to pay attention, TV will eventually have to pay attention because we're a marketable force." El-P*

There are ups to working with a major label as well. If you desire the trappings of a jet set life and constantly being on TV, maybe a major label is the place for you. It also opens artists up as celebrities in general, and they get into other areas of entertainment, like movies or TV shows. Going commercial has two definitions and indie does as well. Going commercial can just mean getting on a major and getting known on a much larger scale and making a lot of money. It can also mean selling out and watering down your music to appeal to the majority. Likewise, staying indie can mean staying true to yourself (touching back on authenticity) by making music for yourself first and foremost, but it can also mean getting "no radio play, and never being seen on cable."<sup>i</sup> Ultimately, its up to the artist to decide what he or she wants to accomplish in terms of their career.

*"Why you at the bar if you ain't poppin the bottles? (c'mon)  
What good is all the fame if you ain't fu\*\*in the models  
I see you drivin, sports cars, ain't hittin the throttle  
And I'll be down to do a hundred, top down and goggles"  
-Nelly - "Hot In Here"*

*"Now we the American working population hate the fact that eight hours  
a day is wasted on chasing the dream of someone that isn't us  
and we may not hate our jobs, but we hate jobs in general  
that don't have to do with fighting our own causes,  
We the American working population hate the nine-to-five day-in day-out  
when we'd rather be supporting ourselves by being paid to perfect the  
pastimes that we have harbored based solely on the fact that it makes  
us smile if it sounds dope"  
-Aesop Rock -"9-5ers Anthem"*

Looking in depth at the two types of artists and their musical output further shows the mutualism of their relationship. Underground rap has a different vibe to it than mainstream, but the MC's are all interested in having as many people hear and dig their music as possible. In mainstream rap, especially now, it seems that the only focus seems to be on jewelry, cars, women and the excessive amounts of money rappers claim to have. Everyone's styles seem to be the same, and the fads and fashions have

everyone looking like carbon copies of each other. Masta Ace sees the same problem and believes that, "If every artist were trying to be themselves and do something that hasn't been done, hip hop would be much better off." Fans of mainstream music who want to pursue a career in music only have the Nelly's, Fabolous's and Ja Rule's to look up to, hence the music never evolving for the better. The newest person on MTV is just a lighter skinned version of Timbaland or a poor man's Jay-z clone. Some rap fans like to listen to music they can relate to, or they prefer artists they can relate to. Nelly with his platinum chains do nothing for me if I don't go to clubs every night and add three extra 'r's ' to every word out of my mouth. A lot of fans driven to underground music can relate to artists because they are creative with their music or they speak on topics that a normal person can relate to. Indie artists seem closer to a fans level as compared to a huge rap star. While they are working to finish albums and get more recognition, many indie MC's still work full time jobs. They have to squeeze being creative into the few hours they have after work until they get to a point with their music that it can shift from hobby to livelihood.<sup>ii</sup> When Cage's Agent Orange 12 inch dropped, he was still working at Burger King in New York.

A lot of the underground music community seems very knowledgeable about each other, similar to the mainstream community. With that feeling of community, you get all sorts of collaborations that may work out sonically, or may not. In the mainstream arena, collaborations have to be pushed through each artist's label and contracts, and even if it is put in motion, the product still has to wait to be put out to the public. With independent artists freedom, they can meet up at someone's home or the studio, record and mix a track and have it out on the streets in a matter of weeks. It seems more like friends doing a project together than it does a business venture. A prime example would be the recently released Felt EP: A Tribute to Christina Ricci. Slug (Atmosphere) and Murs (living Legends) apparently have an infatuation with actress Christina Ricci, which led to them recording this EP. On the mainstream side, it seems that as of late, a lot of the collaborations we are seeing are rappers paired with R&B singers. A lot of the pairings are borne from the artists liking each others work coupled with the labels feeling the duos could push units by pairing the best of both worlds, no pun intended.

When learning about artists we find out the usual type of things about them, their influences, who made them start writing, what they want to accomplish and their favorite artists of the moment and so on. When it comes to musical tastes and influences, a lot of the same names come up. Krs-One, Kool G Rap Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, X-Clan, Run DMC and other old school icons are always the response when asked who inspired you to pick up a pen. When indie artists are asked about their favorite current MC's, undoubtedly mainstream names show up. Jay-Z and Nas are many underground MC's favorites, as well as Public Enemy, Eminem, Wu-Tang Clan, Outkast and Cash Money, in addition to their underground counterparts. A good deal of underground MC's like mainstream artists, but still would prefer their own position because they are able to keep their artistic integrity.

To many mainstream rap fans, the sonic difference between mainstream and underground is the lack of catchiness in underground music. In fact, an underground artist notes that belief and disagrees with it in a matter of bars.

*So what the fu\*k is your definition of underground, depressing beats and bleak cats who love the sound? Well I ain't part of that, I'm tired of rappers garbage, I'm the part of the underground who only feels the raw sh\*t.."*

**-Jakki Da Motamouth- "F\*\*k Hip-Hop"**

In general underground rap is different from mainstream, but the difference comes in the quality of lyrics, and the variety of beats and song topics. There are more battle-oriented rhymes in underground rap and the "jiggy" club tunes aren't prevalent at all. Underground rap songs have topics that range from not believing someone, (Kool Keith, "I Don't Believe You") to comic book characters battling rap stars (Last Emperor, "Secret Wars") to paranoia (Non-Phixion, "The CIA is Trying to Kill Me") Mainstream rap songs are full of bass and have a catchy beat as well as a catchy hook that fans can sing along to on the radio or at clubs and shows. With underground rap, fans pay attention to every word they can catch, and at shows its not unusual to see fans rapping every single word right back to the MC. Summing up the two, mainstream rap is more beat driven while underground rap seems to be driven by the lyrics. There are always artists that straddle the line of mainstream and underground, such as The Roots or Mos Def. Looking at the sheer quality of their music one could place them in the underground

category. Even in underground there are cats that still bring the 'gangsta' style to their music. Back in 1997 the Boot Camp Clik's slogan was, "Commercial rap get the gun clap." It's not all art nouveau hip-hop when you get past MTV. There are just as many underground MC's rhyiming about similar stuff DMX and NWA rapped about, they just don't have any desire to sacrifice their craft for money, which is what they feel mainstream artists like Ja Rule (especially) are doing.<sup>iii</sup> He came out as a thugged out MC, rapping about violence and the thug life, which he bought to life with his gruff voice. Nowadays you can see him doing a jig on beaches, or eating Captain Crunch<sup>iv</sup> with two beautiful women rapping about how he needs love while harmonizing with your choice of R&B songbirds.

Looking back at this whole discussion, its evident that other than the desire to keep artistic integrity and differences in the sound, the two forms of rap aren't that different. The biggest difference between anything mainstream and underground however, may be the fans. Mainstream fans usually don't seem to embrace the underground and vice versa. With that vice versa comes the idea of the 'backpacker.' There's no straightforward definition of the 'backpacker' fan, but from reading different opinions and views, a generalization would be that a 'backpacker' is a hip hop fan who is an avid fan of the underground and holds nothing but disdain for the mainstream. And usually once an underground artist puts out one of their more known albums, backpackers are the first ones to say they "fell off," or "sold out." They never have any real reason to dislike mainstream artists, other than they are on TV or their songs are too "jiggy." The whole backpacker aesthetic is very backwards though as proven earlier in the discussion. The fans that hold MC's like Aesop Rock, Murs, El-P, Vast Aire, Mr. Lif, and Ill Bill in such high acclaim despise their favorite artists favorite artists, if that makes sense. Backpacker fans like the accessibility to their favorite artists and they like that they listen to obscure MC's, hence the sudden turn once their most successful album drops. To the artists themselves, backpacker fans are the antithesis of their career desires.

*"When no one knows your name, your vinyl's still in stores, once you get a little life arguin' over who feels it more, we got 16 year old net heads buyin' garbage, wantin' to keep you for their personal private artists..." -Copywrite-"June"*

Just like mainstream artists, underground artists want their music to reach the same amount of people, but they want to be able to share their creation. Mainstream artists write songs for an audience, while indie artists write songs for themselves. They just want that music that they made for themselves to reach a large audience without having to change words here or there or have Mary J. Blige singing the hook. It goes back to artistic integrity. Underground MC's prefer to keep it and try to be successful enough to their own standards whereas mainstream artists can compromise it, or throw it away totally and then drive to their half a million dollar home in their sixty thousand dollar car if they'd like.<sup>v</sup> The fans themselves don't realize that underground MC's have to live as well. Granted they may not wish to live a lavish lifestyle comparable to that of Nelly, but they still need to pay bills and eat and support themselves, hence their desire to sell as many records as their limited distribution allows.

To wrap up, there are many differences and similarities between mainstream and underground rap. The primary aesthetics are different when it comes to sound and content, but the desires of both are similar. Some may say that the desire to make good music outweighs the desire to achieve fame and fortune, while some may believe that the money to be made is the most important thing and the quality of music is secondary. Either way, the whole argument to settle whether underground is better than mainstream will last forever because all information put into the debate is ultimately opinion. The choice of an artist to stay independent or to go major is a big decision and it weighs on what you want to accomplish in the end. To put it simply, when it comes to making rap music, the end justifies the means.

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<sup>i</sup> Blaze Battle 2000-MC Shells line versus Eyedea, regarding his status as an independent MC on Rhymesayers Entertainment.

<sup>ii</sup> Aesop Rock quote from URB Magazine's Next 100. Vol. 11 No. 83

<sup>iii</sup> B-Boys.com excerpt from hip hop culture essay, <http://www.b-boys.com/hiphopculture.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> Music Video, "Put it On Me"

<sup>v</sup> Interview with Masta Ace. While You Were Sleeping. Issue 17