

Final Paper

I recently saw footage from a 60 minutes interview with one of hip-hop's biggest superstars, Jay-Z. Part of the footage that particularly intrigued me was when Jay-Z was performing at a live concert. There were thousands of fans at a sold out venue, all cheering and giving praise to their favorite rapper. A track was then turned on, and the crowd went crazy. It was one of Jay-Z's biggest hits, "Hard Knock Life." This is a very fitting song to a person like Jay-Z, due to his rough upbringing in the Marcy Projects of Brooklyn, New York. The one thing about this song that does not fit is the crowd that is has gone into a frenzy and is singing along to the Broadway sampled "Annie" in the chorus.

Much of the crowd is white, suburban teenagers, both male and female. This is strange to me due to the fact that I anyone could tell, simply by looking at them in their preppy Abercrombie clothing, that they definitely have not lived the same "hard knock life" that Jay-Z has. Even with this great difference in lifestyle, these people still greatly appreciate Jay-Z's music, as well as hip-hop as a whole. Hip-hop is a culture that started in the urban ghettos of the South Bronx in New York. For much of its early years, hip-hop was mostly appreciated by people who lived in these urban environments. These days it is a totally different story. With this paper I will attempt to look at how hip-hop has gone through great changes as far as its accepting audience. A culture that used to be only accepted by people living in the urban ghettos of America is now widely accepted across all white suburban neighborhoods throughout the nation and even the world.

Early forms of the hip-hop culture began emerging in the late 1960's with the element of graffiti, which can be defined as writing names, symbols and images on public facades.¹ One of the first places that it started appearing particularly was in the ghettos of the South Bronx. The South Bronx was going through a very difficult time as a result of the drastic city planning taking place. The man who was heading up the construction was legendary planner Robert Moses. He came up with the idea for the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which would cut right through the center of the most heavily populated working class areas in the Bronx.² The point of this project was to link New Jersey, Long Island, and New York. The problem with this project was that it would require the demolition of hundreds of residential and commercial buildings. This would later bring along Moses's Title I Slum Clearance, which would forcefully relocate 175,000 people into "slums."³

It was in these environments that hip-hop would begin to emerge from. These neighborhoods were stricken with high crime rates, unemployment, and heavy drug use. The South Bronx was facing social isolation, economic fragility, truncated communication media, and shrinking social service organizations. At this point, city leaders and the press had literally condemned the South Bronx and its inhabitants. This would cause the population of North American blacks, Jamaicans, and Puerto Ricans to answer back with a new culture that would reshape their identities and expressions in a hostile, urban environment.⁴

As I mentioned earlier, the first element of hip-hop to emerge was graffiti. City walls of the South Bronx were soon covered with it as it became more and more popular throughout time. It became popular since the residents of the South Bronx did not have a whole

¹ Patricia Rose, "Black Noise." Page 41.

² Patricia Rose, "Black Noise." Page 31.

³ Patricia Rose, "Black Noise." Page 31.

⁴ Patricia Rose, "Black Noise." Page 34.

lot to do with their time, other than getting involved with drugs or committing other serious crimes. Since this activity was as illegal as it was fun, the writers gave themselves new names or identities that would protect themselves, called “tags.”⁵ Ultimately, graffiti was a way for them to express themselves artistically, and would later lead to other forms of artistic expression that would complete the culture of hip-hop.

One of the elements that would follow graffiti was the DJ. DJ’s like DJ Kool Herc would put on parties in their neighborhoods in which they would play the “breaks” from famous records. Breaks are the parts of the records that deviate from the melody to showcase energetic percussion work.⁶ The element that would follow the DJ would be “breaking.” While these “breaks” were being played by the DJ, “breakers” displayed a whole new style of dancing that emerged solely from hip-hop. Breaking can be described as competitive, acrobatic and pantomimic dance with outrageous physical contortions, spins and back flips that are wedded to a fluid syncopated circling body rock. It is the physical manifestation of hip-hop style.⁷

That last element to emerge from hip-hop is the culture’s most prominent facet; rap music, or emceeing.⁸ Emcees would write rhymes to be “rapped” over the break beats at a fast pace, often involving telling stories or bragging and boasting. It is this element of hip-hop that I believe to be mostly responsible for the huge popularity that hip-hop has gained throughout time. Throughout the early years of hip-hop, the audience that was appreciating it was the audience that started it. This audience consists of the mainly Hispanic and black population of the South Bronx, as well as other crime infested cities throughout America.⁹

⁵ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 11.

⁶ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 26.

⁷ Patricia Rose, “Black Noise.” Page 47.

⁸ Patricia Rose, “Black Noise.” Page 55.

⁹ Patricia Rose, “Black Noise.” Page 33.

Throughout 1979, black and Hispanic audiences attended hip-hop functions at uptown clubs and Times Square venues.¹⁰ It was in this same year in which a record was released that would help with the commercialization of hip-hop, and ultimately help bring in a new accepting audience for hip-hop. That record was none other than the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." This record is thought as one of the first rap records to be released in hip-hop history. It was an enormous hit and gained a huge amount of popularity and gave emcees the title "rappers," and as a result that name has stuck throughout time. The importance of this record is that it gave emcees a wake up call and revealed to them that what they were doing had a great deal of commercial viability.¹¹

*I said a hip-hop the hippie the hippie
to the hip hip hop, a you dont stop
the rock it to the bang bang boogie say up jumped the boogie
to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat¹²*

"Rapper's Delight" was released under a record label called Sugar Hill Records. This label owned by Joe and Sylvia Robinson, who had previously run an independent R&B label called All-Platinum, that eventually went bankrupt. The importance of this label is that the Robinsons understood that rap could not only sell but also it could also create real careers for these talented emcees.¹³

¹⁰ Nelson George, "Hip-hop America." Page 28.

¹¹ Nelson George, "Hip-hop America." Page 29.

¹² Sugar Hill Gang, "Rappers Delight." Sugar Hill Records, 1979.

¹³ Nelson George, "Hip-hop America." Page 30.

Over the next four years, Sugar Hill Records began taking rap music to an entirely different level. Sugar Hill began releasing other records that would become some of the most important hip-hop records ever made. These records included “The Message” and “The Adventures of Grand Master Flash on the Wheels of Steel.” What is interesting about a record like “The Message,” is that emcee Melle Mel talks about what is going on in the ghetto and how hard living conditions are.

A child is born with no state of mind

Blind to the ways of mankind

God is smilin' on you but he's frownin' too

Because only God knows what you'll go through

You'll grow in the ghetto livin' second-rate

And your eyes will sing a song called deep hate

This is interesting because a song that talks about all of these harsh topics somehow reached the crossover market that all record executives lust for.¹⁴ Further, Melle Mel is rapping about subject matter of this kind due to an important reason. At the time, rap music did not have a very large outside audience. The people listening to this music were mostly black and Hispanic’s from urban areas. This is why Melle Mel had the freedom to rap about such a subject. There was no outside audience to please, so he could rap about what ever he wanted. He got to talk about that the violence and the drugs that were around him in his environment, and it worked. This relates greatly to lyrics by an emcee named Common, on a song called “I Used to Love H.E.R.,” in which he uses “H.E.R.” to represent hip-hop and how it has changed.

¹⁴ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 60.

She didn't have a body but she started getting thick quick

Did a couple of videos and became afrocentric

Out goes the weave, in goes the braids beads medallions

She was on that tip about, stopping the violence

About my people she was teaching me

By not preaching to me but speaking to me¹⁵

The idea of Melle Mel rapping about what he knew and saw in his environment started to give rap music the label of “black music.” He was rapping about the ghetto and it certainly did not relate to white suburbia. Even though this is true, “black music” is a terrible label to put on rap music, since not only did people of Common’s race buy this record and other’s being released at the time, but one would have to be deluded to think that no white’s purchased them as well. The numbers can prove it.¹⁶ “The Message” was a social commentary that first made rock fan respect rap lyrics. This single went gold.¹⁷

With all the sales that a song like the aforementioned one can produce, it is obvious that the label “black music” does not work at all. It is true that the artists are black and that they are coming from primarily black neighborhoods, but it is wrong to call it “black music” since so many whites have been buying it as well. If something were called “girl music,” one would assume that only girls like it and listen to it, when in reality there would be boys that enjoy the

¹⁵ Common Sense, “I Used to Love H.E.R.” Resurrection album, 1994.

¹⁶ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 60

¹⁷ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 60

music as well. This goes right back to rap music. There should not be a label put on it because it is almost like saying it is only for a certain type of people to listen to, in this case being blacks.

From the release of “Rapper’s Delight,” rap music took off. Kurtis Blow released a record in 1983 called “Christmas Rapping,” which was a hit and definitely helped rap reach a more commercial level, which meant more people were buying the records. This would definitely include whites.

One of the biggest steps in forcing hip-hop into white suburbia would also have to be the invention of the music video. In the beginning of the music video there was MTV, and for years, MTV would not play music by black artists since it was not defined as rock and roll. At the time, MTV defined itself as a televised rock radio station, though they still played videos by whites performing R&B and reggae, both being forms of music that is rooted by black culture.¹⁸ For a while, rap videos could really only be seen on a station called “Video Music Box.” This is where the famous rap group Run-D.M.C comes into play.

Run-D.M.C played a pioneering role in hip-hop video. They were signed to the label Def Jam Records, which at the time was one of the top labels in rap music. The head of the label, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, knew that at the time MTV wanted only to play rock music. In response to this, he marketed and produced Run-D.M.C. to have a strong “rock” edge to their music. Throughout three albums, Run-D.M.C. had a single for each album with a guitar-driven beat – “Rock Box” in 1984, “King of Rock” in 1985, “Walk This Way” in 1986 – each selling many copies and giving MTV a great deal of exposure.¹⁹

Run-D.M.C was also one of the biggest reasons that hip-hop gained an accepting audience in white suburbia. Due to the hard rock edge in their music, it caught white peoples

¹⁸ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 97

¹⁹ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 99

attention and resulted in much greater sales. This is seen especially well with the release of “Walk This Way.” On this record, Run-D.M.C. collaborated with rock and roll legends, Aerosmith. This is song that knocked down any existing barriers between “white music” and “black music.” It showed that people could enjoy hip-hop for what it is and that your skin color did not matter.

In September of 1988, MTV debuted a new show that would give the hip-hop culture one of its biggest boosts in reaching a larger audience. This show was called “Yo, MTV Raps!” This show immediately ranked as one of the highest rated show in MTV’s young history. This would lead to a daily version of the show in 1989, which was hosted by Dr. Dre, Ed Lover, and T-Money.²⁰

This show was absolutely huge for the music industry and for hip-hop. By giving hip-hop music, dances, and gear a regularly scheduled national platform, the broadcast was integral to inculcating hip-hop’s distinctly urban culture into the rest of the country.²¹ It gave everyone in America the chance to view hip-hop culture. They got to see many elements of hip-hop on one show; emceeing, breaking, and Dee jaying. There was even graffiti to be seen on the set.

The show also gave people a chance to see how to dress hip-hop since everyone was wearing the latest gear. People would see Snoop Dogg’s braids or Run’s hat and want to look the same way.²² People even learned to talk hip-hop by watching this show. They could listen to all the slang words and phrases used and then talk like that themselves. Another important thing that this show did for hip-hop was that it helped rap music’s record sales. Since millions of

²⁰ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 101.

²¹ Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 101.

²² Nelson George, “Hip-hop America.” Page 101.

people had MTV in their house, they could hear about hot artists and see them perform. This would result in them going out to their closest record store to buy the artist's latest album.

This show is also a major way that hip-hop reached white suburbia. As mentioned before, millions of people could watch MTV, especially white suburbia. Hip-hop was a fresh new culture that many people that had not yet been exposed to it could easily be exposed to by way of a very popular television station. An MTV executive even stated that the show "Yo, MTV Raps!" was being marketed to white teens.²³ Marketing techniques of this nature are a major reason that hip-hop has reached white suburbia. People knew that hip-hop was going to be big, so why not try marketing it to a different audience.

There is also another subject that has not yet been explored in this paper, and that is why hip-hop appeals so much to white suburbia. It is hard to say exactly, but for the most part I believe it is the fact that the culture is something new and different for a white teenager from a nice, middleclass neighborhood to explore. Rap music itself is fascinating to white teens. It is fascinating because much of the subject matter describes circumstances that a white teen from the suburb has never experienced. The idea of selling drugs, shooting guns, having sex with women at ease, and living in a very dangerous environment is exciting to white teens because they can experience it in the music and not have to deal with the harsh circumstances. They will never have to worry about being shot while walking down the street because they live in safe neighborhoods. Since these people have never in their lives experienced something like this, they find it fascinating to hear the music.

Being exposed to this music often causes the white teen to dress different or talk different. In most circumstances this would cause others to say, "That kid acts like he's black!"

²³ Class notes, November 24.

That is rarely the case. In most cases that kid is simply talking and dressing in a hip-hop style. I have experienced this myself, firsthand.

Ever since I have gotten into hip-hop, my parents would say things like, “But David, you’re white.” It is a shame that people from a generation cannot seem to understand that hip-hop is definitely not a “black” thing. Yes most rappers are black and yes hip-hop started in the South Bronx, which is primarily black, but it is totally wrong to say that hip-hop is a “black” thing. It is true that most white teenagers can in no way relate to the things that some rappers say, but in the end it does not matter. Anyone can enjoy the culture for what it is worth. I know that myself will probably never have to worry about being involved in a drive by shooting, but that does not mean I cannot love the music and appreciate the culture.

So when Jay-Z walks out on to stage and sees that a great deal of audience is white, there is not any reason to think that he is surprised. For the most part, its business. If he wants to sell more records, then why not market to an even larger audience. And while he is selling records, he is helping spread the hip-hop culture across the nation. So are all those kids in the audience living “The Hard Knock Life?” Probably not. They are most likely living the “hip-hop life,” and there is certainly nothing wrong with that.