

Is Hip Hop

**THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE
OF AMERICA'S MOST WANTED MUSIC**

Dead?



MICKY HESS

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Mickey Hess

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2006, Nas released his eighth album, *Hip Hop is Dead*. The Queens rapper's provocative album title caused controversy among rap artists and listeners, and led to complaints from Ludacris, Young Jeezy, and Lil Wayne, who claim that hip hop is alive and well in the South. In fact, Ludacris responded to Nas by wearing and marketing a T-shirt that read, "Hip Hop Ain't Dead. It Lives in the South." On December 7, 2006, Southern rapper Young Jeezy got into an on-air confrontation with old-school MC Monie Love, on her radio program on Philadelphia's WPHI-FM: Jeezy argued that hip hop has changed, not died; but Monie sided with Nas, and blamed the content of today's hip hop for killing the culture. She complained that the MCs of today rhyme only about "struggles, street hustling, and coming up." Yet these stories of struggling and hustling along the path to stardom are central to hip hop's appeal, and connect to an important history of success stories in American autobiographies. They show artists actively engaging with the reality that hip hop has become big business, and that its stars often get rich selling stories of their struggle to make it in hip hop. Hip hop is no less political today than in Monie Love's heyday, and its topics are no less complex.

Nas and Monie Love are certainly not the first rappers to lament the death of hip hop. Saul Williams's song, "Telegram" (2004), for example, finds hip hop lying in a ditch, "dead to itself." Williams proceeds to offer hip hop culture a litany of advice on how to revive itself by abandoning consumer-driven rhymes about cars and jewelry, and returning to its roots. Even Southern rap pioneers OutKast declared hip hop dead. On 2001's "Funkin' Around," Dre claims "I'm out here knowin' hip hop is dead," and complains that the average listener can't comprehend this statement. But for Nas to pronounce hip hop dead at the height of its sales and popularity—and at the pinnacle of Southern hip hop's success—points to a number of contradictions, and the new breed of Southern rapper at the top of the charts found the proclamation insulting. For Nas to name his

album *Hip Hop is Dead* is a marketing scheme, of course, but commercialism, insincerity, and marketing to the mainstream are exactly what the album attacks.

According to Nas's lyrics, hip hop died because it strayed too far from its origins. Of course, if hip hop today looked and sounded exactly like it did when it began in the early seventies, it surely would not have survived. Although Nas never specifically calls out Southern artists for killing off hip hop, the implication is that hip hop was at its best and most vital when it was contained to the New York City neighborhoods where it began. *Hip Hop is Dead*, like many other nostalgic recordings ranging from Common Sense's "I Used to Love H.E.R." (1994) to Missy Elliott's "Back in the Day (2003)," promotes the myth of a pure, unadulterated form of hip hop that sought to promote hope and celebrate life rather than make money. In one view, this culture never truly existed; and if it did, Nas would have been too young to participate. In another view, this culture still exists today, just as it did in the seventies, in small neighborhood clubs, kids' basements, and city parks. In 2007, the music and culture has expanded beyond New York City; hip hop exists worldwide in local scenes as much as it does on MTV. In fact, the wealth of hip hop scenes and start-up independent rap labels across the globe would indicate that many more people are involved in making hip hop outside the mainstream than possibly could have been involved in the 1970s. Make no mistake; thousands of people today still rhyme for free and out of love for hip hop. If anything, hip hop is more alive today than it ever was.

Nas is the latest in a series of hip hop doomsday prophets, who for three decades have declared that the music and culture is on its last legs. Because hip hop emerged during the waning days of disco, critics originally saw it as a passing fad. On July 12, 1979, Chicago disco jockeys Steve Dahl and Garry Meier held "Disco Demolition Night" at Chicago's Comiskey Park. In response to his having been fired when WDAI changed to an all-disco format, Dahl called for fellow disco haters to come together at Comiskey and demolish disco records. About 50,000 people attended to watch disco LPs destroyed. That date often is referred to as "The Day Disco Died." Three months later, Sugarhill Gang released "Rapper's Delight," recognized as the first hip hop single to reach nationwide radio.

The death of disco is itself debatable, because disco's influence was heard in the 1980s in American dance music and in the emerging European club sound. Disco even influenced hip hop: the bassline of "Rapper's Delight" was adapted from a segment of the song "Good Times" (1979), by the disco band Chic. But disco as a style, a movement, and a genre did

not survive into the eighties. Hip hop, unlike disco, was more than dance music. It incorporated dance music; the feel-good vibes of 1970s funk, soul, and R&B; and the politics of Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets. Critics targeted hip hop's digital sampling much in the same way they had attacked disco's electronic production styles. Sampling's critics, though, took the complaint further to argue that hip hop—because it incorporated segments of existing songs—was unoriginal and inartistic. Despite such criticisms, hip hop prospered. “Rapper's Delight” became a worldwide hit, and as record labels rushed to sign rap artists like Kurtis Blow and Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five, the music quickly diversified into different subgenres with their own production styles, aesthetics, and politics. The emergence of Def Jam Records group Run DMC in 1983 gave hip hop a hard rock sound that set the stage for the sonic assault of Public Enemy and the gangsta politics of N.W.A. in the mid-to-late eighties.

Hip hop survived comparisons to disco and assertions that it was, in fact, not music. Hip hop developed a culture and a music all its own, with shows like *Yo! MTV Raps*, which debuted in 1988, bringing hip hop to new audiences across the world. As hip hop entered the nineties, however, certain artists, fans, and critics began to argue that it had strayed too far from its origins (an argument that Nas furthers in *Hip Hop is Dead*). Although some criticism was directed at pop crossovers like MC Hammer and Young MC, the particular target of this attack was Vanilla Ice, the white rapper who invented a streetwise biography for himself and outsold any black rapper before him. Ice reminded critics of the way in which white stars like Elvis Presley had taken over rock and roll in the 1950s. Again, hip hop survived. MCs killed the threat of the white rapper by addressing Vanilla Ice in their lyrics and in interviews. As hip hop became a mainstream music form, artists began to devote songs to explaining the distinctions between real hip hop and pop rap, and to target those artists they perceived as fake, or only in it for the money.

Hip hop has faced several threats to its culture in its thirty-five year history. Rap artists responded to the initial idea that rap music was a passing fad by continually reinventing the music with more complex rhyme flows and rhythms that moved away from the borrowed disco beats of 1970s hip hop acts like Sugarhill Gang to the jazz-influenced sounds of Eric B. & Rakim in the 1980s. With this reinvention came variation in sound and style. The late eighties and early nineties saw the jazzier, Afrocentric styles of New York artists such as De La Soul, Queen Latifah, and A Tribe Called Quest meet with the West Coast gangsta funk of N.W.A. Hip hop expanded from Los Angeles and New York to include regional

acts like Miami's 2 Live Crew, Houston's Geto Boys, and Seattle's Sir Mix-a-Lot, among many others. With this dissemination came more variation, and the development of regional sounds, styles, and slang.

With this history of variation in mind, it is easy to look at hip hop's story as one of evolution. But what is most interesting about hip hop is the emphasis its artists place on knowing and maintaining connections to hip hop's origins. Many MCs devote lyrics to defining their unique musical styles, criticizing biters who steal lyrics or rip off rhyme styles, giving credit to those artists who came before them, and calling out artists whom they perceive as fake. Yet even as rappers call out those artists who are in it only for the money, they also brag about how much money they make from their own music, which they claim stays truer to hip hop's original aesthetic. As hip hop evolved, new artists consistently sought to invent their own new style while calling attention to their roots in the old school. This balance between old and new is at the heart of debates about what constitutes real hip hop, and it is at the heart of the debates between Nas and Lil Wayne, and Young Jeezy and Monie Love.

Hip hop has been America's most wanted music, both in terms of sales and as the target of censorship. With its simultaneous focus on invention and tradition, hip hop has survived sampling lawsuits, FBI boycotts, Supreme Court obscenity hearings, mixtape raids, parody of the culture, pop crossovers, and the threat of white rappers taking over the music. How has hip hop continued to survive and thrive? By attending to these issues in lyrics. Hip hop lyrics tell the story of hip hop, from reporting shady dealings with record labels to reminding us of the music's pioneers, like Nas does on "Where Are They Now?" (2006) and Edan does on "Fumbling over Words that Rhyme" (2005). MCs use their lyrics to hold each other accountable to the ideal of hip hop culture as an art form, whether done for love or for money. Disputes rage on between major label rappers and independent or underground hip hop artists about what constitutes *real* hip hop, and this debate keeps hip hop alive.

Nas's *Hip Hop is Dead* is important because it furthers this debate, but his critique of hip hop falls short in taking any action to correct the problems he identifies. On "Where Are They Now?," Nas provides a litany of forgotten rappers, and laments the fact that they are missing from today's limelight. Yet none of these old-schoolers appear on Nas's album. Instead, his guest stars are Kanye West, Snoop Dogg, and The Game, three of the music's most visible, best-selling stars. Rather than simply complain that listeners have forgotten classic talents like MC Shan and MC Ren, Nas is in the position to offer these MCs a hand up by bringing them back into

the studio and having them guest on what promises to be a top-selling album. Kanye West helped revitalize the career of Twista, a Chicago MC whose sales had faltered since the early 1990s, by having him guest on 2004's "Slow Jamz." Dr. Dre helped boost the career of Los Angeles rap pioneer King Tee by signing him to his Aftermath label and having him guest on his album *Chronic 2001* (1999). Such efforts are a much more genuine way to honor hip hop's history and call new attention to those MCs who paved the way for Nas, Dre, and Kanye. Yet even Nas's small effort does introduce his listeners to earlier rap artists, which is crucial to keeping hip hop alive. The importance that many rappers place on paying respect to hip hop's originators and making younger listeners aware of the music's history is one thing that keeps hip hop alive. Artists hold themselves accountable to tradition, and give credit where credit is due, but Nas is in a position to do more than complain about forgotten rappers by offering them guest spots on his album.

In another contradiction, *Hip Hop is Dead* draws a line between real hip hop and commercialism, yet Nas's debut album, 1994's *Illmatic*, was released on Columbia Records, a major label, and so were his seven subsequent albums, including *Hip Hop is Dead*. Although Nas has recorded music independently, via unofficial releases like *Stillmatic Freestyle* (2001) that he circulates directly to radio stations and hip hop clubs, there is no question that Nas is a commercial recording artist. Still, Nas places hip hop's contradictions between culture and commerce at the heart of his death pronouncement. On the title track, "Hip Hop is Dead," Nas embodies these same contradictions: first, he complains that today's rappers all sound alike and have standardized rap in order to sell more records, then, on the same song, he boasts that his face was plastered on Sony's trucks to promote his album, and brags about making millions of dollars for Sony. In these contradictions, Nas's assessment of present-day hip hop pines for a "good old days" that never existed, and ignores a grassroots, independent, underground hip hop scene that exists as much today as it ever did.

Hip hop always embodied contradictions between making music and making money. Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" is blamed for taking rap music out of New York City communities and selling it to the masses, but six years earlier—in 1973, the year that marks the invention of hip hop—Kool Herc, the culture's founding father, envisioned hip hop as a way to corner the market on block parties. Herc took music out of Manhattan disco clubs and brought it to Bronx neighborhoods, plugging his sound system into city lampposts and hosting block parties. Yet for all his

desire to use music to bring people together, Herc did charge admission to his parties. Unable to make enough money as a club DJ, Herc wanted to own his sound system and not lose a cut of his money to club owners and concert promoters. Instead, the proceeds from his block parties went directly into his pockets, and he used it to improve his sound system, ensuring that Kool Herc's block parties remained better attended than those of his competitors.

Hip hop began with Herc's intent to make money while taking control of his music, and these values of profit and control still exist in the music today. Where today's Southern rappers differ from Kool Herc is that they state their financial agendas directly, and make them a topic in their lyrics, a development that Monie Love has criticized. Lil Wayne, for example, and his label Cash Money Records, make no qualms about their intent to get rich, but to get rich outside the corporate ladder system of the middle-class. Instead, they want to own their master recordings, own their record label, and control the production and promotion of their music.

The hip hop work ethic is best exemplified in the hustlin' and grindin' mentality of artists from New Orleans's Cash Money Records and Houston's Swisha House label. The hustle grows out of using street smarts to find ways to make money outside the system. Hustling has been a part of hip hop's vocabulary from the beginning, as early DJs and MCs were influenced by the 1973 album *Hustler's Convention*, recorded by Last Poets member Jalal Nuriddin under the pseudonym Lightnin' Rod. *Hustler's Convention* influenced hip hop's content and style of storytelling, as it combined poetry, jazz, funk, and toasts to narrate the adventures of fictional hustlers Spoon and Sport. Toasting is a close predecessor to rap vocals; a form of rhythmic storytelling, toasts trace their roots back to African bad man legends, Jamaican selectors and DJs, and prison culture, in which inmates trade boastful stories about their own exploits. Spoon and Sport influenced hip hop pioneers like Kool Herc, who tied his own image to a different kind of hustle: Taking music out of seventies disco clubs and into the streets, where he could control the record selection, the style of the party, and the proceeds. More recently, records like Cormega's *Legal Hustle* (2004) and The Lost Boyz's *Legal Drug Money* (1996), as I'll discuss in chapter two, promote making rap music as a legal way to make a living as an outlaw.

Grindin', the other half of the expression "hustlin' and grindin'," grows out of older expressions like "the daily grind" and "nose to the grindstone," which connote hard work. In lyrics, rap is presented as a renegade endeavor, but to make the hustle productive, you have to learn the rules of

the music industry in order to outsmart the corporate executives and manipulate the system to your advantage. Rap artists rhyme about their work to make sure that they are fairly compensated and not signed to unfair contracts like those of several rappers in the eighties, and black R&B stars, rock artists, and studio musicians in earlier decades. Hustlin' and grindin', then, is developing a blend of street smarts and business savvy that allows rap artists to maintain control of their music and make a living as musicians, while maintaining the outlaw identity that makes hip hop so appealing to listeners.

In the end, Nas's message—that we killed hip hop by commercializing it instead of preserving it—and Lil Wayne's agenda—to make music and money on his own terms—are not that far apart. Wayne and Birdman of Cash Money Records exhibit the same individualist, entrepreneurial spirit with which Kool Herc created hip hop. Similar self-styled success stories exist throughout American history, and are closely tied to concepts of the American Dream. The essential structure of this success story can be traced back to Benjamin Franklin's 1791 *Autobiography*. In hip hop lyrics, Benjamin Franklin's name is used mostly in association with the hundred dollar bills that bear his portrait. Puff Daddy's "It's All About the Benjamins" (1997) popularized the slang term in hip hop, and more recently Lil Wayne claims, "Only history I know is Benjamin Franklin," on his 2005 song "Fly Out." When rappers use Franklin's name to signify currency, their songs about making and stacking Benjamins also become an extension of the American self-made man narrative that Franklin laid out in his autobiography, a narrative that extends to the autobiographies of American businessmen such as Henry Ford and Lee Iacocca, and to rap albums like E-40's *Charlie Hustle: Blueprint of a Self-Made Millionaire* (1999).

Franklin laid the foundation for American Dream stories, emphasizing self-examination, the development of virtue, and adherence to a work ethic. His values of thrift, prudence, and diligence established a value system that came to be associated with the American middle class. Yet hip hop, even with all its success, is not a middle-class music. Franklin's prudence and thrift in dicta such as "a penny saved is a penny earned" and "early to bed, early to rise" seem out of place in a genre in which expensive cars and jewelry are status symbols, and late nights in clubs are the standard. Rap artists tend to go for the immediate payoff rather than the long-term investment, but they do rhyme about their career aspirations and business strategies. Hard work is not foreign to hip hop, and artists describe this hard work in their lyrics as they talk about the ingenuity and diligence it took to bring them to the top of the charts.

Slim Thug, Paul Wall, and Mike Jones (who named his 2007 album *The American Dream*) devote song lyrics to describing the hard work that brought them to the top. When Mike Jones tells his listeners to “Work hard, pray and grind, and keep God up on your mind,” his advice isn’t that far away from Ben Franklin’s, but is even closer to the self-made businessperson story of Madam C. J. Walker and the survivalist mentality espoused by Malcolm X. The importance of Malcolm X to shaping hip hop’s value system is evident in the numerous references to Malcolm in lyrics from artists such as Ice Cube and Ghostface Killah, and Malcolm’s mentality is echoed in the lyrics of Mike Jones above. To hustle and grind is to work hard every day to achieve one’s goals, even if that work includes armed robbery and drug trafficking along with practicing the craft of rap. Malcolm’s autobiography creates its own version of the American dream, and Malcolm’s involvement with crime and drugs along his path to success is similar to the stories heard in some hip hop lyrics. Malcolm’s keen sense of his own mortality also is present in hip hop, particularly in the lyrics of Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G., two MCs who—like Malcolm in the end of his autobiography—imagined their own deaths in songs and videos before they were murdered.

Hip hop is distinctly American, and the stories told in its lyrics fit into larger traditions of American success stories like those of the historical figures described above, as well as more recent figures like Oprah Winfrey. In hip hop’s version of rags-to-riches, rappers get rich selling stories of their poverty.¹ Even with hip hop’s emphasis on getting rich, evidence of social struggle is crucial to establishing credibility. Rap artists must show that their struggle gave them the skills necessary for surviving in the streets and for navigating the music industry without being exploited by record labels. Because hip hop is African-American music and a primary cultural export, its stories become conflated with African-American experience.

Hip hop’s representations of racial identity are very much tied to social class. Of course drug abuse, fatherless homes, street gangs, and welfare and housing projects are not strictly African-American problems, nor are they part of the experience of many black Americans. Hip hop’s very development, though, has been attributed to the social conditions its pioneers faced in the South Bronx in the 1970s. Rappers often promote their class struggle as key to their legitimacy, and they go so far as to expose the middle-class backgrounds of other artists who claim to have grown up in poverty. The message is that growing up black means growing up poor. The pervading notion is that social disadvantage gives MCs an inimitable quality, and a voice to tell their stories.² To develop a hip hop career,

artists have to authenticate themselves through stories of social struggle, and MCs get rich selling these stories in their lyrics. Stories of social struggle and the dream of getting rich and famous through rap music are central features of albums from rap artists such as The Game, The Notorious B.I.G., and Jay-Z. The struggle for wealth is central to hip hop success stories, and the artists frame it as black American experience.

In response to this African-American model of the authentic, white artists like Eminem and Nonphixion emphasize their own experiences with poverty and crime as a way to authenticate themselves to black rap artists, and thus gain acceptance with listeners. These white artists argue that poverty, crime, and violence are not exclusive to black experience, and of course they aren't. Ishmael Reed's essay "Airing Dirty Laundry" (Reed 2000) explores the reality of these same social problems in white suburbs, and contrasts this reality with 1990s media representations of black people as part of the political war on drugs, which he calls "a war against black neighborhoods." Reed criticizes black figures who have made their names by exposing black problems, who air blacks' dirty laundry "as if that laundry was unaired" by whites.³ While the black figures Reed criticizes speak from outside the social conditions they expose, rappers position themselves as representatives of the communities where they grew up. In lyrics, MCs assert that they represent Staten Island, or Linden Boulevard, or the Stapleton Housing Projects. In making themselves avatars for these specific communities, rap artists promote their childhood disadvantage not as dirty laundry, but as an experience that gave them the strength to pursue rap careers and to pull themselves and their families out of those same neighborhoods. Thus, many of the stories told in rap lyrics today are stories of how the MC came to his or her rap career.

My study of hip hop's past, present, and future begins with chapter one, "The Rap Career," which identifies several songs and albums in which hip hop artists trace their paths "from bricks to billboards," "from staircase to stage," or "from Staten Island to the Cayman Islands." These rags-to-riches stories reinforce credibility by reminding listeners that the MCs overcame social disadvantage to achieve their success in the music business. Because hip hop artists use these autobiographical stories of social struggle to establish themselves as "real," I examine the use of the terms "real," "fake," and "phony" in lyrics, and trace the roots of hip hop's emphasis on authenticity.

In chapter two, "The Rap Life," I look at the ways that hip hop career stories redefine rappers' roles in the music industry. I use autobiography studies and African-American literary history to explore hip hop's autobiographical stories and the fictional personae created in the music. I identify

two key counterstories (“criminal-to-artist” and “music-as-drug”) in which artists use autobiography to justify or celebrate their commercial success by framing it in terms of survival through crime and entrepreneurialism. These narratives counter the history of black musicians exploited by white record executives, as the artists assert their active roles in the production and distribution of their own music.

Chapter three, “The Rap Persona,” examines hip hop artists such as Digital Underground and MF DOOM, who complicate hip hop’s basis in autobiography as they perform in persona. They split their identities to perform as two or more distinct personalities, using masks, costumes, and different vocal styles to distinguish between the artist and the alter ego. These rappers use their personae to critique the hip hop industry and its focus on marketing the image of the self, often presenting themselves as super villains sent to take revenge on the music industry.

Building from this look at personae, which rappers often borrow from Italian mafia figures, martial arts films, and comic book super villains, chapter four, “Sampling and Stealing,” examines the way hip hop identity is constructed through digital sampling. Hip hop artists cut and paste pieces of audio from cartoons, movies, political speeches, and other songs to create different contexts for their own vocals, and to rely on the cultural awareness of their listeners. Chapter four extends chapter two’s look at criminal narratives, as it studies the ways lawsuits over digital sampling have led hip hop artists to describe making hip hop music as a Robin Hood story in which rappers steal sounds from the same record companies who refused to grant legal ownership to the black R&B groups that wrote and performed the music. I argue that today’s hip hop artists have become very business savvy—they know how to find ways around record industry regulations that prohibit the use of existing material, and this business savvy translates into interesting marketing tactics, such as Dr. Dre’s vouching for Eminem as a white rapper who is accepted and respected by his black peers.

Chapter five, “White Rappers,” studies the problem white rappers face of framing their biographies within a model of hip hop realness based on the career narratives of black artists. When Vanilla Ice’s official artist bio falsely claimed he had come from a ghetto background similar to many of his black hip hop contemporaries, he initiated a backlash against white rappers. More recent white rappers have to contend with the discrediting of Vanilla Ice by addressing their white skin in their music. Eminem, for example, claims that being white made it harder for him to gain acceptance as a hip hop artist, even as it made it easier for him to sell records to white listeners.

Finally, chapter six, “Hip Hop, Whiteness, and Parody,” examines the ways that hip hop parodies confront racial stereotypes related to social privilege. The white rapper MC Paul Barman adopts a self-effacing stance in his music to address issues of minstrelsy and whites’ attempts to gain hip hop credibility. The white rock group Dynamite Hack addressed concepts of white privilege in the video for their acoustic rock cover of N.W.A.’s gangsta rap classic “Boyz-N-the-Hood.” N.W.A.’s involvement with the parodic cover complicates their career as the self-proclaimed “world’s most dangerous group.”

Each of these chapters takes on a different aspect of hip hop music and culture, but the book as a whole studies the story of what it means to make rap music, and the ways rappers tell this story in their lyrics. Hip hop’s metaphors of rap music as a drug promote the idea of making rap music as an outlaw act: It offers opportunities to make money outside the systems of wage labor that put low-income African-Americans at a disadvantage. At the same time, drug metaphors also represent street-smart entrepreneurialism because rap capitalizes on stories of this disadvantage. The criminal images of rap music often get attributed to shock value and to the marketability of violence, but although images of crime and drugs do sell, rap’s criminality goes deeper to critique the processes of making and selling rap music. As MCs write songs about their careers and tell stories of self-styled success, they extend the knowledge they gained in the streets to their interaction with the record industry.⁴ In response to that industry’s history of taking over African-American music such as blues and rock and roll, rappers promote the very production and distribution of their records as a criminal act that corrects an imbalance in power.

Hip hop’s attention to these issues keeps the music and culture very much alive, even as rap sales drop. According to Nielsen Soundscan, rap sales dropped 20.7% from 2005–2006, compared to a 0.5% decrease for country, a 4.5% decrease for metal, and a 9.2% decrease for alternative rock. These numbers do not take into account Internet downloads and file-sharing, ringtone sales, bootleg CDs sold on the street, or the recent revitalization of unofficial mixtapes recorded by major-label artists outside their recording contracts with a label. Mixtapes have become a big business—DJ Drama’s mixtapes, featuring major-label artists such as Lil Wayne, Young Jeezy, Rich Boy, and T.I., sell so well that in January 2007 the police, working with the Recording Industry Association of America, raided his office and confiscated four vehicles and 81,000 discs. Still, even with these alternative avenues for circulating hip hop music, the Soundscan records likely reflect some decline in sales.

Yet while this large decline in rap sales has led members of the news media to celebrate the impending death of the music, Nas is making a different argument, and one that accuses the high sales of hip hop albums of killing the music, rather than keeping it alive. If commercialism has killed the original spirit of the music, can declining sales help steer hip hop back to its roots in the underground? In the conclusion, I will return to this question of hip hop's future, and the question of how such a loss in market share will effect hip hop music in the years to come.