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# From Grassroots to Comercialization

Hip Hop and Rap Music in the USA



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## I. Intro

From the late 1990s onwards, rap music sales have shown a large and ever growing increase making rap the fastest growing music genre, ahead of country, rock, classical, and all other musical forms (cf. Kitwana 2002: 9/10). "By 1998 rap was the top-selling musical format, outdistancing rock music and country music, the previous leading sellers" (ibid.). This popularity has given rappers an increasing presence at the Grammy's as well as regular appearances in advertisements for major corporations throughout the US and worldwide (cf. ibid). Today,

African American musicians are a commanding presence in the marketplace: top-selling artists routinely sign multimillion-dollar contracts, and their fans fill stadiums and consume heavily promoted CDs by their favorite artists (Ramsey, Jr. 2003: 164).

Nowadays one could not imagine chart shows, discos or house-parties without rap music. According to Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., rap music, which belongs under the cultural umbrella called hip hop, "is virtually everywhere: television, radio, film, magazines, art galleries, and in 'underground' culture" (ibid.). Teenagers, young adults, professionals, and even presidential candidates like Barack Obama<sup>1</sup> listen to the lyrics of artists such as *Jay-Z*. In addition to buying the records of their favorite artists, rap music fans also imitate the way their stars act and dress. Thus, "hip hop culture is also a way of dressing, walking, and talking" (Ibrahim 2003: 173). Hip hop clothing, for example, is an essential part of the movement's lifestyle and can be purchased in stores around the world. Often it is even

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<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama stated in an interview available on [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFSVG7jRp\\_g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFSVG7jRp_g) that he enjoys black music in general and likes to listen to the music of rapper *Jay-Z* in particular.

designed or sold under the name of some of the biggest stars of the rap music scene (*Jay Z, P. Diddy, LL Cool J, Eminem*). In other words, rap music and hip hop culture are, beside the sports sector, the most lucrative form of entertainment and lifestyle in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Beyond that, “from cinema, clothing lines, magazines, and American vernacular, hip hop’s influence has made an indelible mark in popular culture” (Ogbar 2007: 38).

In the past three decades hip hop has developed from an underground movement in one of New York City’s poorest boroughs, the Bronx, to a worldwide multi-billion-dollar industry.

Scholars, critics, and music fans have accompanied the movement on this way. The questions many of these people ask are why hip hop has become what it is today and, most importantly, whether hip hop developed from a so-called grassroots movement to a commercialized entertainment industry that has nothing to do with its original motivations as a cultural and social movement. A main point of interest is whether hip hop and rap music can function as a means of resistance against prevailing racial inequality or merely act as another form of entertainment.

This study aims to give answers to the questions raised above as well as to examine the reasons for hip hop’s international success, the dangers of it, and the motivations rappers had and still have to pursue their art. Also, race, the language of rap music, the construction of authenticity, misogyny, and the connection with 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century minstrelsy will play a major role in the analysis of this phenomenon in American popular culture. It is yet to be answered if the success of this form of art has been a blessing or a

curse for its performers and their audience, the so-called hip hop generation.<sup>2</sup>

Before I address these questions, it is important to learn about the roots of the hip hop movement. Where and why did it all begin? What were the intentions of the 'founding fathers'?<sup>3</sup> Later on I will concentrate on the developments hip hop has made and present the different subgenres of this particular musical genre.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Bakari Kitwana, the hip hop generation is said to cover African Americans born between 1965 and 1984. (cf. Kitwana 2002: XIII).

<sup>3</sup> I use the gender specific expression 'fathers' because – as we will see in the following chapters – the inventors of hip hop/rap music were exclusively male.

## II. The Development of Hip Hop

### II.1. What is Hip Hop Culture? What is Rap Music?

#### – A Definition and Early Developments (1974-1982)

Sometime in 1974, in an apartment in the Bronx, Joseph Saddler, who was to become known as *Grandmaster Flash*, plugged two turntables [...] into the same speaker. Placing a different record on each turntable, he switched from one to the other [...] – until he had an exciting mix of sound (Shaw 1986: 292).

This is the way the man who produced one of rap music's most influential songs in 1982, "The Message", started experimenting. The result was to become one essential part of the hip hop culture: the art of DJ'ing. The second important element of rap music is rapping itself. The rapper's or MC's<sup>4</sup> task is the rhythmic delivery of rhymes – the more complex the better. Along with this, the main job of an *emcee* is to "control the crowd with his voice and crush opponents with his lyrics" (<http://www.b-boys.com/classic/hiphopculture.html>). The original task of an MC was to introduce and praise the DJ he or she worked with and to hype up the crowd. When rapping became more central to the music, the term rapper was introduced. Because of the "spoken or semi-spoken declamations, usually in rhyming couplets" (Ramsey, Jr. 2003: 165), the art of rapping can be characterized as something between speech, prose, poetry, and song. Yet, before there were DJs and MCs around, before anybody dreamed about a multi-billion-dollar-rap-music-industry, there were the roots that provided the foundation for rap music. Tommy Lott argues in his article, "Black Vernacular Representation", that this distinctly African American practice has roots that "can be traced to

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<sup>4</sup> The abbreviations DJ and MC derive from disc jockey and master of ceremonies respectively.



the oral and music making traditions of West Africa” (Lott 1994: 243). Along with spirituals and coded sermons performed by slaves, rap music is a “unique form of expression” (ibid.). He even claims that rap “provides a paradigm of African American cultural resistance involving transformed African retentions” (ibid.).

One of the founders of the musical genre, a man who calls himself *Afrika Bambaataa*<sup>5</sup>, affirms that the African elements were definitely important parts of rap’s foundation (cf. Perkins 1996: 2). In 1993 he said, “Rap in general dates all the way back to the motherland [Africa], where tribes would use call-and-response chants” (Afrika Bambaataa 1993 in Perkins 1996: 2). He continues to list the ancestors:

In the 1930s and 1940s, you had Cab Calloway pioneering his style of jazz rhyming. The sixties you had the love style of rapping, with Isaac Hayes, Barry White, and the poetry style of rapping with the Last Poets, the Watts poets and the militant style of rapping with brothers like Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan (ibid.).

It may seem farfetched but a sports legend is also referred to as one of the inspirers of inner city youth that eventually created the form of rap we know today: Muhammad Ali. His use of rhyming couplets is designed to insult and ridicule opponents and is defined as signifying (cf. Perkins 1996: 4).<sup>6</sup> Another more obvious source was the style of black DJs in the period from the 1940s until the 1960s. As a means to secure their share of the market, they “bombed the airwaves with their personal styles” (George 1998: 4).

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<sup>5</sup> Choosing a stage-name is an important feature in the rap music world. It derived from disc jockeys that used to give themselves names that would be recognized by their audiences. These stage-names often embody certain personal characteristics and are used to create an identity that cannot be matched by other rappers (cf. George 1999: 5). Afrika Bambaataa’s real name is Lance Kahyan Aasim.

<sup>6</sup> “I float like a butterfly, sting like a bee/ There ain’t no motherfucker that can rap like me”, the CC Crew used the first part of Ali’s famous words to create the elemental form of rap (cf. Perkins 1996: 4).