

I AM HIP-HOP

CONVERSATIONS ON THE MUSIC AND CULTURE



ANDREW J. RAUSCH

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Music and Culture***

Andrew J. Rausch



THE SCARECROW PRESS, INC.

Lanham • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

2011

Published by Scarecrow Press, Inc.
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
<http://www.scarecrowpress.com>

Estover Road, Plymouth PL6 7PY, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rausch, Andrew J.

I am hip-hop : conversations on the music and culture / Andrew J. Rausch.
p. cm.

Includes index.


ISBN 978-0-8108-7791-7 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8108-7792-4 (ebook)

1. Rap musicians—United States—Interviews. 2. Rap (Music)—History and criticism. I. Title.

ML394.R387 2011

782.421649092'273—dc22

2010053563

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

*For Michael Dequina,
Henry Nash, and Aron Taylor,
three of my oldest
and best friends.*

*Every age has its own poetry;
in every age the circumstances of history choose
a nation, a race, a class to take up the torch
by creating situations that can be
expressed or transcended only through poetry.*

—Jean-Paul Sartre



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FOREWORD

Elton John starts his song “Crocodile Rock” with the verse, “I remember when rock was young.” I’ve heard that song thousands of times, but never really thought about the implication and true meaning behind that statement. I never really thought much about what it would be like to remember when rock was young—when this new form of musical expression rose up and captured the imagination of America’s youth, forever separating from the generation that came before them. At least I never really thought about it until very recently.

Not that long ago I was having a conversation with someone more than twenty years my junior, and the topic turned to hip-hop. And at some point I actually found myself saying, “I remember when hip-hop was young,” as thoughts of Elton John’s “Crocodile Rock” passed through my mind.

At the risk of dating myself, I remember when hip-hop was young. I was young, too. A child really, when I first heard Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight.” Everyone knows that song now, as it is pretty much the ultimate classic of hip-hop, having come along at a time when the sounds emitting from the streets of New York hadn’t even been labeled hip-hop yet. To be ten or eleven years old, having been raised on a steady musical diet of Earth, Wind & Fire and Billy Joel, and hearing for the first time, “I said a hip hop the hippie the hippie to the hip hip hop, a you don’t stop the rock”—well, that was just something else altogether.

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It's difficult to truly convey what I felt about this music, other than to say it sounded "right" to me. It was new and young, and it didn't sound like it was meant for people my parents' age. And so I started flirting with this new music, which came with its own unique style of dance, as well as art that was a bold expression of wild colors that defied the conventions of what art could be, where it could be, and if it could even be legal.

By the time Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five dropped "The Message," I was done flirting with hip-hop—I had fallen in love. These were the days of trading tapes with my friends, writing my own rhymes, practicing backspins on old pieces of cardboard, and planning my graffiti masterpiece. And to be perfectly honest, the only thing I did well was trading tapes. My aspirations of being a great emcee or a great breaker or a great graffiti artist faded in time, and I resigned myself to being nothing more than a lover of hip-hop.

When I think of what hip-hop means to me, I think of a culture of artistic expression that rose up in places where no one expected there to be art. Hip-hop, in all of its permutations, is the creation of something from nothing. It is the transformation of ugliness into beauty. It is a defiant stance against a society that seeks to marginalize the poor and disenfranchised, only to find that the poor and disenfranchised have created their own kingdom.

Hip-hop to me is so many things. It is possibilities. It is about finding your way when you're lost. It is knowing that deep down inside of you there is a message that must be delivered to the world, on your terms, in a language that you speak. It is hearing a song like "Street Justice" by the Rake for the first time, and being transported to another place through the sheer might of lyrical force.

For those of you too young to remember when the Fat Boys were still the Disco 3, or when Kangol Kid and Dr. Ice were backup dancers for Whodini, I feel sorry for you. Sure, you can love hip-hop and immerse yourself in every aspect of the culture, but you will never be able to say you remember when hip-hop was young. You will never be able to say that the first time you experienced hip-hop was the first time the world experienced it, as well.

For those of you old enough to remember when Kurtis Blow first dropped "The Breaks," or when Run-DMC first appeared on *Soul Train* and blew the spot up, try not to get too caught up in lamenting the days

gone by. It is difficult at times to not look at the current commercialized state of hip-hop without becoming cynical. We old guys now talk about how things were “back in the day” and we wax nostalgic about the old school, but we need to keep in mind that everything must change and grow—even if it changes and grows in ways we don’t always understand or appreciate.

One last thought before I wrap this up—just as I remember when hip-hop was young, I remember when people said it was a fad that wouldn’t last. There were naysayers who discounted all of it—the music, the dance, the art—dismissing it as nothing more than junk. But what they were really dismissing was a culture that had found its voice—a voice that those within the establishment could never fully comprehend. And they were wrong. Hip-hop has lasted. It has thrived and flourished and spread all over the globe, and when all is said and done, hip-hop to me is about being alive and finding a way to express yourself to the world.

—David Walker, author of *Reflections on Blaxploitation*



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Iwould like to acknowledge the following people: Stephen Ryan, Marilyn Allen, Louis L. Gregory, David Walker, Michael Dequina, Henry Nash, Aron Taylor, Ronald Riley, Charles Pratt, Kerri Rausch, and all of the artists whose interviews are included in this book, as well as all of the agents, managers, and publicists who helped to make it happen.



INTRODUCTION

The unifying question found in each of the following interviews is “What does hip-hop mean to you?” Some of the interview subjects dug down deep and came up with thorough, well thought-out responses about the nature and historical meanings of hip-hop. But the answers I like best are the ones in which the interview subjects simply say something to the effect of “It’s my life.” Those are the responses I can best relate to. You see, hip-hop has long been my life, as well. Many of you may be questioning that statement, unable to believe that a white guy from Kansas would even have the audacity to write a book on the subject of hip-hop, let alone claim it to be a defining factor in his life. But it’s true. That I could have been so personally affected by this urban music and culture is perhaps a testament to the widespread popularity and worldwide embracing of hip-hop, as well as its raw power.

As you will discover within the pages of this book, hip-hop means something different to everyone. It is likely that inner-city b-boys will find difficulty in recognizing or appreciating that people of other races who live in places like Nebraska or even Japan have grown up with this music and identify with it in much the same ways that they do. But again, it’s true. And while hip-hop must be recognized as a black art form and culture first and foremost, it cannot be denied that a great many people of varying races from a wide variety of countries define themselves through hip-hop. What was once an underground movement in the streets of New York City is now a phenomenon which reaches around the globe. It has been said that

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hip-hop music is the soundtrack to modern America, and that certainly appears to be true. Hip-hop music is now used in advertisements for everything from automobiles to dish soap, and it is quoted and referenced freely in virtually every corner of American society. When right-wing conservative Bill O'Reilly says "Fiddy" Cent or country singer Trace Adkins uses the Keith Murray-originated phrase "badonka-donk" in a hit song, it is a testament to the power and universal nature of hip-hop music.

To answer my own question, hip-hop is very time specific to me. I will forever see hip-hop in the way it existed in what is now known as the "golden age" of hip-hop, which lasted from approximately 1986 to 2003. Baggy Girbaud jeans were in fashion, as were oversized hoodies and Timberland boots. Classic albums like Wu-Tang Clan's *Enter the 36 Chambers* and Black Moon's *Enter Da Stage* blasted in our car stereos and Walkman cassette players. Groups like Public Enemy and Tribe Called Quest made us see hip-hop as the legitimate art form that it is; rather than making asinine dance songs like so many artists today do, these artists (and they truly were *artists*) continually pushed the creative boundaries of this new music.

Like many of the kids who grew up on a steady diet of hip-hop music, I fancied myself an emcee. I recorded a number of demos between 1993 and 1998. And although I came close to a record deal, did a show with Tech-N9ne, was featured in *Rap Sheet* magazine, and even managed to get one of my songs played on Chuck D's radio show, the dream never materialized for me. In the end, it turned out that I was a much more talented writer than I was an emcee. But that love of all things hip-hop has never died.

And that's what this book is about—passion. It's a heartfelt tribute to this music and culture; a reminder of what it once was, and a discussion on what it now is and soon will be. The older folks in the seventies and eighties called hip-hop a fad, but they were dead wrong. Today the older generation—myself included if I'm being honest—often complains about what hip-hop has become, but again I think we fail to see the larger picture. Just as the older folks who had grown up with the rock music of the 1950s (Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, etc.) were unable to recognize the rock music of the 1970s (Led Zeppelin, the Who), time has shown us that both styles of music possess merit. And while no one will ever say that artists of today like Soulja Boy or Nicki Minaj rhyme about anything of substance the way guys like Q-Tip and Chuck D did 20 years ago, it is perhaps important for us to remember that they don't really have to. In retrospect "Blue Suede

Shoes” or “Teddy Bear” seem lyrically shallow when compared to something like “Stairway to Heaven,” but they are no less classic.

The song says that there is a time for everything, and perhaps that’s true. Just as America turned to the lighter fare of comedies and dance films during the Great Depression in the 1930s, maybe it needed a lighter incarnation of hip-hop to get through the financially hard times we have faced as of late. And if the adage that things come in cycles is correct, then perhaps another era of more profound lyricism is just around the corner.

Nas’ statement that hip-hop is dead has been heavily debated (within these pages, as well), but the truth is that hip-hop isn’t dead. In fact, it’s far from dead. It’s everywhere we look today. The truth is that it’s constantly evolving, and that evolution isn’t even close to being finished. Maybe instead of criticizing today’s hip-hop music we should take more time to analyze it and appreciate it for what it is rather than admonishing it for what it isn’t.



CHAPTER ONE

9TH WONDER

Producer

Little Brother, a Durham, North Carolina hip-hop group consisting of Phonte, Rapper Big Pooh, and producer 9th Wonder, released their debut album *The Listening* in 2003. The album received critical acclaim, and 9th Wonder's production, which consisted of chopped and manipulated soul samples, drew comparisons to legendary beat-makers Pete Rock and DJ Premier. The producer then remixed Nas' album *God's Son* on a lark, releasing the project as *God's Stepson*. This street album was well received and started the trend of remixing popular hip-hop albums. After 9th Wonder had already received praise from the likes of Pete Rock and DJ Jazzy Jeff, Jay-Z tapped him to produce the song "Threat" for his 2003 effort *The Black Album*. Following the release of this album, 9th Wonder remixed it just as he had done previously with Nas' *God's Son*, titling the project *Black Is Back*. This project, which many believe to be even better than the original Jay-Z album, brought the producer further acclaim.

9th Wonder's stature in the industry continued to grow when he produced three songs ("Girl," "Is She the Reason," and "Game Over") for the 2004 Destiny's Child album *Destiny Fulfilled*. The producer then worked with such noted soul singers as Erykah Badu and Mary J. Blige, winning a Grammy for his work with the latter. He then produced Little Brother's second album, *The Minstrel Show*, which once again garnered acclaim for the both the group and the producer. In 2007, 9th Wonder parted ways with Little Brother. He has since produced the music for the popular animated series *The Boondocks*, and has gone on to work with such noted

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hip-hop artists as Ludacris, Lil Wayne, Murs, Wale, Drake, Black Moon, and David Banner.

In addition to his work as a producer, 9th Wonder also hosts a radio show in Fayetteville, North Carolina, called *True School Radio*. He is the president, founder, and CEO of It's a Wonderful Music Group, which caters to the 28- to 40-year-old demographic of music listeners. He also runs two independent labels, Jamla Records and the Academy Music Group. In 2007, 9th Wonder was appointed Artist-In-Residence at North Carolina Central University, where he began instructing a hip-hop history course. He then went on to teach similar courses at Duke University and Barber Scotia College. 9th Wonder has also been appointed the National Ambassador for Hip-Hop Relations and Culture for the NAACP, where he leads a board of Ph.Ds, hip-hop artists, and Juris Doctorates.

What does hip-hop mean to you?

For me hip-hop is a way of life. It has shaped so much of my life. Its inception was in 1973, and I was born in 1975. It's been so much a part of my life—the true essence of hip-hop; this is what I eat and breathe on a day-to-day basis. I'm talking about the study of the music, the cultural aspect of it—not how much money it's made over the years, but the cultural aspect of it and its worldwide impact, and the impact that it had on the black community, and the messages that it created in the late eighties and early nineties that helped form me in my adolescence. It's shaped a great deal of my life and has formed my way of thinking—artists like Chuck D and KRS-One and Brand Nubian and Tribe Called Quest. And plus it turned me on to a legion of artists that I never knew about through its usage of samples in the music.

Tell me about some of your earliest productions. Most of us used the pause button on our cassette players to make little loops in the beginning. Did you do that?

[Laughs.] Yeah, I did that. I did that in the mid-nineties . . . We all did that because we wanted a way to make beats when we didn't have the proper equipment. That was some of my earliest production, and then I started actually making beats around 1998 or 1999. That led to my messing around with it for a few years until the inception of Little Brother. I've been at it, just from a hip-hop standpoint—actually practicing the dynamics of the hip-hop culture—for about 12 years. As far as knowing about the music

and it manifesting over time within me, whether it was through a clarinet or a keyboard, oh, man . . . we're talking about 24 years! And you were probably the kid like me who had the CD book with about 500 CDs in it. I think it manifested in all of us that way.

What producers would you say have most influenced you, and in what ways specifically?

DJ Premier because I think he's the best in hip-hop at capturing the winter-time sound; just that gritty sound. I can't think of any producer in history that's produced music that was grittier than what DJ Premier has done. If you want the 40 below, Timberland, puff jacket—that type of boom-bap production—then it's DJ Premier. I can't think of anybody else who comes close to that. Then there's Pete Rock, who's the best sample flipper. He uses samples better than anyone else I've ever heard in my life. If you take those two cats together—with a little Beatminerz and Organized Noise and some different cats thrown in there . . . Those are my primary influences.

It must be kind of surreal to be in a position now where people are comparing you to both of those guys.

It's kind of crazy. You take someone like Big Sean, who just signed with Kanye West; he told me, "You're a legend to me. I've been listening to you since I was 15." And he's 22, so that kind of makes sense. I started listening to Tribe Called Quest when I was 14. And that makes sense for cats to say that I am the equivalent of those guys—not in terms of music, but because they grew up listening to my music. To them, I *am* Pete Rock. I mean, I went crazy over Pete Rock and DJ Premier, and *their* favorite producer was Marley Marl. It just goes down the line like that. I think I'm similar to them in that someone who doesn't really know hip-hop may not know my name, and that was what Pete Rock and DJ Premier were to us. I think to this generation I am the one that embodies samples and the boom-bap sound, while all the other producers may do something different. I'm the one that still sticks to that, and so I think that's why they would say that.

What was it like landing your first record deal with Little Brother?

We really didn't know what to make of it. We already had *The Listening* finished. That album was already a year old when we finally signed with ABB Records out of San Francisco. For us to be from North Carolina and sign a record deal with a label in San Francisco was just totally crazy. We never

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went into this trying to get a deal. It was just basically, “Let’s see what happens.” We had so much love for the music that we were just like, “Let’s see where this goes.” We just tried to make each song better than the last one. We didn’t really know what we were doing. So when we got our first deal, and our advance was just \$2,000—split four ways because we had to give our manager a piece—it was just like, “Okay.” I mean, it didn’t really hit me until we actually started traveling and going places and finding that people knew our songs. That kind of hit me more than the fact that we had a deal. We would go to New York or L.A., and people would know our songs word for word. That was when it hit me that we were onto something.

What are some things that you learned as an artist from being a part of a group?

Just that it’s hard. [Laughs.] There are just different dynamics with different people. Nobody’s right, nobody’s wrong. It’s a very difficult process. But if you stick with it, it can be a real learning process. You not only learn about people, but you also learn a lot about yourself.

How would you say that your methods of production have changed since you crafted the first *Little Brother* album?

The formula is still the same, but I’ve updated it a little bit. I’ve got a friend who told me, “You still make underground records, but now you make mainstream underground records.” And the way that you make it mainstream is by making sure that the listener can learn the record. It’s about “if I listen to this song on the radio, can I learn the record?” If it’s something that’s difficult to learn, then that’s when it goes out of the mainstream. So I try to make records that are still me, but ones that people can learn. So that’s how I’ve changed over the years. And I also try to make my sound a little bit bigger. I just believe in my fans, and my fans believe in me. I am the representation of what hip-hop used to be. I try to stick with that and not stray too far away from that, because I believe that trying to appeal to a bigger mass audience would shorten my career. But sticking with my 300,000 loyal followers for 20 years is what will give me longevity, and that’s what I want to do.

As a fan of the boom-bap sound of the “golden era” of hip-hop who also owns his own record label, are you going to use that power to try and resurrect that sound in a bigger way?

I think it’s going to take more than me. I think everything repeats itself in 20 years, and I think that’s where hip-hop is going. Hip-hop goes in

cycles just like history does. We are now at a time where we are 20 years removed from 1990 . . . We were 20 years removed from the seventies and stuff like Curtis Mayfield and the Motown sound when D'Angelo came out and kind of brought that back. I think it takes a generation to have to be removed from that sound, or it takes a generation of children who grew up with their moms' and dads' music. If you ask a 15-year-old right now what the first rap record they heard was, they might say Nas. And you'd ask, "How was that?" And they'd say, "My mom and dad used to play that." So now we're at a point where the 15-year-olds were born in 1995, and their parents are saying, "You're gonna listen to what I listen to in the car." So that means that they're listening to groups like Tribe, De La Soul . . . You follow me? So what's going to happen is that that sound is going to become cool again. You've got kids going to college and wanting to listen to adult music. I mean, when we went to college, we still listened to our Jodeci and Mary J. Blige, but if you *really* wanted to be grown you listened to the Commodores and Bob Marley and John Coltrane and the O'jays. You listened to something kind of vintage that your friends may not have been up on. All the college kids did that. Now it's going to happen again. You might listen to Drake and Trey Songz and J. Cole, but if you really want to be up on it, you need to get up on the *Midnight Marauders* album. We're entering into an era of the new classics now. So that's going to strike a chord and some kid's going to say, "You know what? Let's take off all these chains and start wearing good wood and African medallions again." That's coming back, so I think that whether I try to do it or not, that's going to be the thing to do anyway.

You mentioned the new classics, which makes a good segue for this next question. How did you wind up producing "Threat" on Jay-Z's *The Black Album*?

[Jay's engineer] Young Guru was a fan of Little Brother, and a fan of my production as well. He reached out to me, and he said, "I need you to come to New York and play some records for Jay." So I went to New York, and that's how "Threat" came to be. I actually played 29 beats for Jay first, and he was like, "Man, I need you to make one for me." I made "Threat" for him. That's how I got on *The Black Album*, and that was seven years ago tomorrow, if you can believe that. It was September 22, 2003.

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What was that experience like working with Jay on that?

Surreal. It all happened in a span of three or four days, so it's kind of a blur to me. Every time I get to meet Jay or sit around and talk to him, it's a blur. Whether it's three hours or it's 10 minutes, it's all a blur. But it was surreal. I mean, here no one was sampling records anymore, and I was a kid who was labeled as being a backpacker, or labeled as being underground. And here he's asked to produce a record by one of the best rappers, if not *the* greatest rapper walking, on a heralded album that also comes with a movie. It's unheard of. It was surreal. In fact, it's still surreal to talk about it.

You know, anytime I meet somebody it comes up. You talk to someone and someone else says, "You know who this is? This is 9th Wonder." And they say, "Nah, I don't know who that is." And then they say, "He made a beat for Jay-Z," and that instantly validates me. I've made records with everyone from Destiny's Child to Mary J. Blige, and that's the one project that seems to validate me. "He got a beat with Jay-Z." And they say, "Oh, word?" And that automatically makes me somebody.

You remixed both *The Black Album* and Nas' *God's Son*. What was the response to those projects like?

The Nas *God's Stepson* project came along when a friend of mine brought me the Nas a capella CD and said, "See what you can do with these." And I did the whole thing in a weekend. I really didn't think that much of it. And that made a *lot* of noise. Then MF Doom did one after me called *Nasdradoomus*. Then some other cats did the same thing. Then the next thing you know, *The Black Album* a capellas came out and started a whole revolution again. And everyone was like, "You've *got* to do it." And I did. It just started out as something I did in my household that I didn't think was going to be that big of a deal, and it wound up being a type of revolution of remixing albums. And everybody thought I used that to get in the game. Nah, I was just remixing an album because I got tired of hearing Nas over those beats. I wanted to see what they would sound like over mine.

I think the Jay-Z remix album, *Black Is Back*, is really amazing.

I don't know if Jay has ever heard it. I remixed my song twice. Maybe he heard it, maybe he didn't, but it is what it is. I did it because it was fun. That was why I originally got into this game in the first place. I get to make records and live out my childhood dream. I get to be a part of something—not because of the money, but because of the camaraderie and the

brotherhood. You couldn't script it any better than this. So that's why I made those records. For me, it was just a part of the craft.

Do you ever hand over a beat to an artist, or are you pretty much there with the artist the entire time?

Sometimes. I mean, we're in an age now where people just take my whole catalogue . . . They just go online and Google my name and find the instrumentals and then make a whole album with them and put my name on it. [Laughs.] And that's without my being there or ever meeting them. They think that's going to get them to the next level. As for my actual productions, sometimes I do that. I mean, I've done it once or twice. I did it with Skyzoo. But really, I'd rather be there while they're recording it. We are producers. That's what we do, so I'd rather have more of a hands-on situation with the music that I produce.

That's sort of the old school mentality. I'm always amazed to hear about all of these artists and producers that never meet. They just go in and record it and then have someone else mix it down.

I was watching something on Herbie Hancock, and he was making an album. I think if Herbie Hancock and Sting could coordinate their busy schedules and get together to collaborate, then anybody should be able to. And they were in the studio together for five days. And this is *Sting* now! Of the *Police*! And that's why the level and quality of their music is so incredible. You know, people are in this game now for the wrong reasons. They'd rather be at the latest big party than be in the studio collaborating and putting together a good record.

You're extremely prolific. How many beats would you say that you create in a month's time?

I'd say 100. No offense to anyone else, but I don't have a lot of vices. I don't drink, I don't smoke. I don't have those things standing in my way. This is what I want to do. I think a lot of us take for granted being a part of this thing, you know? The business side of it sucks. Everyone hates the business side of it. A&R, chasing checks, dealing with the label . . . That all gets on your nerves. But come on, man, we're making music for a living. What is your gripe? There are lots of people who work nine-to-five jobs who hate their jobs. We make beats for a living and people praise us for it, you know? What is your gripe? So that's how I stick with it. Everyone gets