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## From Consciousness to Callousness: The Misdirected Path of Rap

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This paper describes the misdirected path and tainting of rap music from its positive origins to the commercially violent genre it is thought of today. Variables in this devolution of rap include the influence of record and distribution companies, deindustrialization, white flight, migration of gangs, and the introduction of prison culture. This paper introduces a new variable which is the relationship between the emergence of crack cocaine and the devolution of rap music. Other work has begun to appear that mentions one or several variables but not all of them. Arguing that none of these factors can be fully understood in isolation, this paper is the first to examine them in depth and to synthesize them into an interwoven, inseparable whole.

*of Rap music. This discussion reveals influences that were instrumental in initiating the change: record and distribution companies. It also reveals those influences that accelerated the changes: crack cocaine, gangs, drug dealers, and a heavy influence from prison culture. The change in culture has produced such sensational negativity, appealing to commercial interests that it has snowballed into a new generation of rappers who have become commercially driven. They are intellectually disinterested, susceptible to emotional contagion, moved by exaggeration, and impressed less by knowledge than by fanaticism. They embrace a thug mentality and follow constricting standards of street life learned from illegal outlets: hustling, pissing, gang-banging, and jail/prison experiences. The positive moves demonstrated by old school rappers, which were considered an essential part of building a new cultural identity, have taken a back seat to mainstream sensationalism of street life. Today, in mainstream arenas, the style of rap is copied, but the old-school spirit of rap is lost. It is a true case of stolen identity.*



## *Prologue*

*Rap has a bad rap. Rap music, a sub culture of the greater Hip Hop culture, is no longer portrays its original values, "Never curse and always have fun while projecting a positive image." This is the original code of ethics captured by Africa Bambaataa, the Godfather of Hip Hop. It is safe to say that the distinct patterns of Old School Rap have become tainted. To understand the cause of this tainting, we must look at the beginnings of Rap music. This discussion reveals influences that were instrumental in initiating the change: record and distribution companies. It also reveals those influences that accelerated the changes: crack cocaine, gangs, drug dealers, and a heavy influence from prison culture. The change in culture has produced such sensational negativity, appealing to commercial interests that it has snowballed into a new generation of rappers who have become commercially driven. They are intellectually disinterested, susceptible to emotional contagion, moved by exaggeration, and impressed less by knowledge than by fanaticism. They embrace a thug mentality and follow constricting standards of street life learned from illegal outlets: hustling, pimping, gang-banging, and jail/prison experiences. The positive mores demonstrated by old school rappers, which were considered an essential part of building a new cultural identity, have taken a back seat to mainstream sensationalism of street life. Today, in mainstream arenas, the style of rap is copied, but the old-school spirit of rap is lost: It is a true case of stolen identity.*

*However, many of my most significant original claims have yet to be discussed. For example, the BFI documentary does not examine the relationship between crack and rap; furthermore, this documentary does not argue that the variables must be examined as inseparable and intertwined components of a larger picture.*



## *Introduction*

This paper synthesizes the many different variables that affected the misdirected path of rap. This paper will argue the many different variables that have been cited in the decline of rap cannot be separated—they must be dealt with as a whole. These factors include the fact that Bambaataa attempted to keep rap positive, but was overwhelmed by the migration of gangs from the west, coupled with white flight and deindustrialization, the repression of the music industry, and the west coast gangs' increasing performances in nationally distributed rap. I will further argue that in addition to these variables, that the introduction of crack in urban neighborhoods accelerated this misdirection. The emergence of crack not only empowers the west coast gangs, but also promotes the introduction of prison culture as urban teens are shuffled in and out of prison—and into the world of now-mainstream rap.

This paper was aptly timed to coincide with issues being dealt with by the Hip Hop community in general. As the socially conscious rappers attempt to reclaim Hip Hop, the devolution is being analyzed by many individuals. One of the most renowned of these was a documentary released by Black Entertainment Television (BET). This documentary contained many of the forward-thinking ideas originally envisioned in my proposal. I have tried to include as many of these new ideas as possible in this paper. However, many of my most significant original claims have yet to be discussed. For example, the BET documentary does not examine the relationship between crack and rap; furthermore, this documentary does not argue that the variables must be examined as inseparable and intertwined components of a larger picture.



The second component of this project is the CD video. This video is a visual montage of the degeneration of rap. This was included as a component of the project because it allows me to make visual the results of the research to reach a wider community than by limiting the discussion of my results to an academic paper. Furthermore, this CD video also includes portions of my interview with Warren (“WA-WA”) Snipes on rap through deaf eyes. The interview was taped for the purpose of making this information available in a video format. He is not cited in this paper as a source, although the questions are available in Appendix A. Including this interview should increase the desire of viewers to watch the video.

### *The Godfather of Hip Hop*

Afrika Bambaataa, born Kevin Donovan, was ingenious. He demonstrated his tremendous foresight and creativity when his own life-changing experience inspired him to change the lives of other black people through the cultural movement known as “Hip Hop”. Bambaataa started this cultural movement in the late 60s, although the term ‘Hip Hop’ was not coined until the early 70s and did not gain the international, mainstream attention it has today until the 80s (Universal Zulu Nation, 2007). Bambaataa’s forward thinking moved a generation to celebrate life during an era, as Jonathan Kozol (2000) observes, with little to celebrate. Bambaataa raised the consciousness of poor, black youth by educating them about identity and a sense of belonging, as well as providing ways of interpreting and comprehending the world collectively. This awareness ensured the survival of their black heritage and enriched their black culture, both essential resources for socio-economic success and any contributions to the wider American



society and the global community. Sadly other forces, such as those discussed in the introduction, have all but destroyed these achievements, thereby aborting the means for sustained change and continued contributions (QD3-I, 2003).

Before his life-changing experience, Afrika Bambaataa was a feared man on the streets of

This sense of a culture's "collectivity" comes into focus within the disciplinary lens of sociology. Sociology is a social science that studies human social life, groups, organizations, institutions, societies, and social relationships (Wright, 1959). Sociology focuses primarily on analyzing the modern world while also taking into account historical influences. This discipline studies structured human relationships; it does not study individuals per se. Studies reveal that the behaviors of a social group are not solely influenced by the characteristics of its individual members, but rather are mainly influenced by the underlying social structures (i.e. family, community, government). Sociologists make us aware of social forces around us: They enable us to rise above personal experiences, and to interpret what is happening to us in relation to major events. We are provided with intellectual tools that can lead to increased self-understanding and confidence. Berkeley linguistics professor John McWhorter says it best in *Losing the Race: The Sabotage of Black America* when he says that the more we know about why we act as we do, and about the overall workings of our society, the more likely we are able to positively influence our own future (2001). In exactly this way, the cultural movement of Hip Hop is a specific example of these dynamics. That is, Hip Hop contributed to the ground for these sociological ideals to take root, grow and bear fruit. But this ground was poisoned before the cultural movement could bear fruit of self-understanding, confidence, and a positive influence on the future of Black Americans.



My focus is to understand what poisoned the once fertile soil and subverted the promise of Hip Hop culture.

Before his life-changing experience, Afrika Bambaataa was a feared man on the streets of New York City due to his affiliations with a notorious gang called the *Black Spades*, formally known as *The Savage Seven* (Cook, 1995). The Savage Seven was a gang responsible for terrorizing the Bronx River Projects in the South Bronx in 1968 (Rhodes, 1993). The Black Spades split in to various divisions with Bambaataa as the formidable division leader of the Bronx River Project. The New York City Police Department documented the appearance of Black gangs in New York inner city neighborhoods with the appearance of The Savage Seven. It appears the gang formed in order to protect their *turf*, the Bronx River Projects, against older gangs and soon became one of New York City's largest and most formidable gangs (National Gang History, 2007). In this destructive chaos, Afrika Bambaataa rose to power. However, he was forever changed after visiting the continent of Africa, returning with his decision to steer his gang (Black Spades) away from crime (Universal Zulu Nation, 2007). There is no documented description of Bambaataa's pilgrimage to Africa. However, it is known that many other leaders in the black community, namely Louis Farrakhan and Malcolm X, made similar pilgrimages, each with similar results of raised consciousness about the black community that they sought to communicate to others and to translate into positive change.

Bambaataa intuitively grasped some of the major theories of sociology in social life in raising awareness about social forces surrounding the black community, increasing self-



understanding and confidence, teaching others how to assess both opportunities and constraints, and helping to convert constraints and challenges into opportunities. He transformed New York gangs into “crews” who used their lyrical talents rather than weapons of destruction (Davey D. Corner, 2007). As a reformed gang member, he was able to identify with active members and help them to channel their energies into positive outlets: *break dancing, graffiti art, rapping, and D J-ing*. These “crews” organized under the direction of Bambaataa and became known as The Zulu Nation. The Zulu Nation was known as a formidable organization because of Bambaataa’s infamous reputation as a strong man, but the organization did not seek confrontation and focused on cultural expression. The Zulu Nation promotes knowledge as a key element for educating the masses about black culture. The discipline of sociology teaches us that knowledge is power. Former gang experiences enabled Bambaataa to relate to active members and were used to reach a generation of youth who were being swayed by drugs, *hustlers*, and *pimps*. As Bambaataa himself explains, “When we made Hip Hop, we made it hoping it would be about peace, love, unity, and having fun so that people could get away from the negativity that was plaguing our streets: gang violence, drug abuse, self hate, violence among those of African descent (The Universal Zulu Nation, 2007).” Unfortunately, this positive turn did not last. Hip Hop writer William Wimsatt laments, “Before, Hip Hop was a culture to liberate the minds of ghetto youth. Now, because of how people have narrowed it, it’s keeping people trapped in a ghetto state of mind” (Bender, 2000). Yet there are signs of hope, not in the mainstream but at least in black organizations. Today, The Universal Zulu Nation is focused on helping a misdirected generation by reminding them why Hip Hop was created. Using the key sociological principles Bambaataa



teaches, it is the goal of the organization to raise social consciousness in order to affect social change. Following are several tightly interwoven factors contributing to the misdirection of rap music that the Zulu Nation now combats.

Crack cocaine, an inexpensive yet highly potent, highly addictive form of cocaine, was introduced around 1981. Its explosion onto the streets of New York and other urban

*Subversives* and the title "urban epidemic." The governor at the time discusses the severity of

In order for us to gain some insight into the socio-historical environment of Hip Hop culture, let us begin by discussing direct variables affecting the change of rap. These variables are: deindustrialization, white flight, migration of gangs, emergence of crack cocaine, and the introduction of prison culture. While these variables are described separately in the paper, they cannot be analyzed in isolation because they each have their own influence on the chain of events leading to the devolution of rap.

trash, abandoned during white flight. Crack heads would often sleep, sleep and use

In 1959, an expressway was constructed through the heart of the Bronx causing many middle class residents in the neighborhood to leave. In 1968, large project-housing developments were constructed along the northern edge of the Bronx. These housing complexes were high crime areas and caused the few middle class residents who remained in the area to leave (Rhodes, 1993).

cops and competitors (McBride, 2000). L.A. gangs encountered N.Y.C gangs in an

From 1968 to 1973, the number of deteriorated and vacant neighborhoods increased. Reportedly, the gang "Savage Seven" claimed many such areas as turf. Crime, drug addiction, and unemployment became the norm (Rhodes, 1993). As McWhorter explains,

gathered in inner-city neighborhoods; settings that served to perpetuate violence. It was



no “The inner-city was created through the confluence of white flight and of the  
ga deindustrialization” (2001). It was a virtual war zone. et against other gangs, while  
others gathered to serve drug clientele in areas they considered “their turf.” Gang  
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“b introduced around 1981. Its explosion onto the streets of New York and other urban  
Pr areas earned the title “crack epidemic.” The governor at the time discusses the severity of  
de the influx, likening it to “a Mack truck out of control, slamming into New York hard”  
As (Schumer, 2007). The drug activities were centered in the large project-housing of New  
vi York. These down-trodden neighborhoods became a central feature of the trade because  
de they were neglected areas with high unemployment and a large poor population. Poverty  
and desperation are prime real estate for drug sellers. In these neighborhoods, *Crack*  
dens were run-down vacant buildings that were filthy and littered with old furniture and  
trash, abandoned during white flight. *Crack heads* would often shop, sleep and use  
it locked like London after World War II. The Harwood Zulu Nation literally  
(Chang, 2001)  
article “Crack” in the 1986 Time Magazine, the drug was most popular in the inner city.  
A Los Angeles was one of the first major cities dubbed, at the onset of the epidemic, as a  
bl lucrative “rock” market. Subsets of the L.A. Bloods and L.A. Crips began to have a  
H strong presence in New York, bringing with them dealers with heavy security to ward off  
fo cops and competitors (McBride, 2000). L.A. gangs encountered N.Y.C gangs in an  
ca explosion of turf wars. of status degradation ceremonies, prisoners become socialized  
into prison life” (1977). A great many of these prison socializer inmates find themselves  
ba From 1968- 1974 the Savage Seven and other newly formed gangs and outside gangs  
lo gathered in inner-city neighborhoods; settings that served to perpetuate violence. It was



not unusual to find violence springing up at these locations as byproducts of the gatherings. Some gathered to rap, some gathered to protect against other gangs, while others gathered to serve drug clientele in areas they considered "their turf." Gang confrontations ensued when gangs encountered rivalries, "outsiders" whose intent was to "lock-down" specific low-income projects for the purpose of securing drug clientele. Protection of turf led to drug-dealing, drug-dealing led to violence, and violence led to deaths. Crime rates in the Bronx skyrocketed (East Coast Gang Investigators Association, 2007). Gang members matriculated through a prison system with degrees in violence and each graduate was eager to return to turf battles with new approaches to turf dominance (Hunt et al, 1993). Early rap was born out of this war-zone.

Before Hip Hop, during the late 60's to early 70's, Jamaica's bloody tribal wars fostered a music and culture of defiance in roots, dancehall, and dub reggae. This music and culture—a safe space from the bloody gang runnings on the street-immigrated to the Bronx—a space so devastated by deindustrialization and governmental neglect that when Ronald Reagan visited in 1980, he declared that it looked like London after World War II. The Universal Zulu Nation literally emerged from a peace forged between racially divided, warring gangs. (Chang, 2001)

An ever-growing portion of our society is behind bars. The statistics are staggering for black males; as a result we are dealing with what is now being called "prison subculture" (Hunt et al, 1993). Sociologists Leger and Stratton state, "The inmate social system is formed as a reaction to various pains of imprisonment and deprivation inmates suffer in captivity; through a series of status degradation ceremonies, prisoners become socialized into prison life" (1977). A great many of these prison socialized inmates find themselves back on the streets, returning to neighborhoods and friends at a loss as to how to regain loyalties, allegiances, and friendships. They rely on tactics learned while incarcerated to



gain “points” with specific crews. These behaviors were a perfect segue into gangsta rap and will be discussed later in the paper.

### *Old School Hip Hop*

Old School Hip Hop represents a culture existing as early as the late 60s in New York. It started as Hip Hop then quickly changed to “Old School” as the culture grew, taking on new characteristics. Hip Hop represented an acre of fertile ground in the midst of a polluted and crime-ridden environment of the early 70s to mid 80s. Hip Hop’s positive influence was like seeds planted in this fertile ground. Early traditions, such as the importance of oral tradition, of black culture watered the growth of positive Hip Hop:

Hip Hop was a way to become famous in your neighborhood—not by being the worst criminal or the best athlete, but by decorating subway cars with social messages, by executing a power move on the dance floor, by making people shake their butt to bits and pieces to obscure records, or by proving your lyrical prowess” (Bender 2000). KRS, an old school rapper, was living in a shelter when he first received notoriety for his record “South Bronx”, “When DJ Red Alert played ‘South Bronx’, I found myself representing the Bronx, I never realized how much a record did for pride and self esteem. The Bronx was alive with it. (QD3-I, 2003)

The rappers that existed during the era of Old School Hip Hop have understandably become known as Old School Rappers. Early lyrical battles between these rappers occurred in neighborhoods and on local stages. It was an unwritten rule that what was said in this environment was not meant to be taken personally. There are legendary battles noted in raps history like Busy B vs. Kool Mo Dee; this battle took place in 1981 at the Harlem World Stage and gave birth to the lyrical rapper. These rappers were fierce competitors; however, they remain friends to this day. “This battle gave birth to the lyrical MC—you now had to make sense of what you said in order for the community to



give you power” (QD3-I, 2003). KRS-1 vs. MC Shan was also a pivotal moment in the history of Hip Hop because it was the first noted *dis* from an up-and-coming rapper to a well established artist. Dissing, taunts, and competitiveness had their roots in street corner *joaning* (making fun of one another) and always were a part of early rap, but artists took it to new heights when they realized that “dissing” could both start careers and sell records. This new approach sparked the attention of new artists and soon became the approach to “taking an artist’s spot” (QD3-I, 2003). In the early days, although “dissing” was popular and often intense, the community was forgiving and battling artists maintained their friendships (QD3-I, 2003). As a result, rap grew to become a universal music, encompassing different styles of rap (socially conscious, old school) but always “One nation under a groove.” Emile Durkheim’s theory of society as a set of interdependent parts explains the healthy state of the culture of Hip Hop when its members were working in harmony, and the culture was functioning as an integrated whole. Emile Durkheim was a sociologist who saw society as a set of interdependent parts. The parts were held together by what he called social cohesion or social glue. Durkheim referred to social cohesion as organic solidarity or social unity- unity that is based on complex and highly specialized roles. These roles make members of a society dependent on one another. According to Durkheim, this solidarity is the basis for social order and any lack leads to social disorder putting social life under threat.

Socially Conscious Old School rappers used the element of exaggeration specifically to

*Old School Rappers* use of not recognizing, understanding, and applying lessons given

Old School is a term used to describe this same period from the mid 70s to the early 80s.

Old school rappers became the culture’s historians, teachers, and entertainers. Lyrics of



included true-to-life struggles of every day life, sometimes humorous and sometimes tragic, often with advice on strategies to overcome odds. The sum was a portrait of what the culture was experiencing (QD3-II, 2003). In other words, the personal stories always had collective, historical import. Although based in real-life, rappers often created exaggerated renditions of these real-life experiences in order to impress and engage the crowd. Biggie Smalls, a former icon in the rap business, includes the following lyrics in one of his best selling records, "Thinking back to my one-room shack, birthdays was the worst days. One room shack...no food on the table...altar ego rags to riches story." Biggie Small's mom says her son has never lived in a shack, or ever gone without food on the table. Exaggerated stories became part of a rappers creative genius (QD3-II, 2003). The rap artist had to figure out how to tell a common experience in a unique way, a technique used to connect and keep a crowd engaged. Rap stories represented inventive manipulations of cultural idioms. It was also a technique used to connect and engage the crowd.

Socially conscious old school rappers would embellish their messages. The goal was to reinforce the need for cohesiveness, peace and knowledge among people (Hip Hop Summit, 2005). This technique of embellishment was used by both distinct groups of this era. Old School Rappers generally used the technique to engage an audience, but Socially Conscious Old School rappers used the element of exaggeration specifically to focus on the consequence of not recognizing, understanding, and applying lessons given in the social message. Old School Rappers, including Socially Conscious ones, had the positive effect of forming cohesiveness among the people—a bond—among members of



the community. So why then were they experiencing so much resistance from mainstream music sources?

The frustration from marginalized Rappers is often evident in early Rap lyrics and interviews: “Hip Hoppers were angry with radio for not playing them and when they finally did play them, they got angry because they found the music and culture being exploited, maligned, and misused” (QD3-I, 2003). Socially Conscious Rappers found it hard to gain respect for their craft and expressed their frustration with a record industry that refused to acknowledge them. Major labels and distribution companies did not believe Rap music was lucrative, and waved it off as a passing fad. In 2005 Hip Hop activist Davey D. wrote, “Back in the days ‘payola’ used to be done via the envelope full of money that was slipped under the table in the dark of the night to a sheisty radio program director.” This led to preferential treatment for particular artists who could afford to pay the exuberant amounts requested. For those who could not afford the under-the-table bribes, it was the local DJ who ultimately made local Bronx Rappers into neighborhood stars (About Hip Hop, 2007). Afrika Bambaataa became a DJ in the early 70s (Universal Zulu Nation, 2007).

The history of the music industry explains how music industry executives wrote off early Rappers, causing these frustrations. It was a pattern of behavior—conservative, reactive, and profit oriented—that made itself evident time after time. Innovations we now know as rhythm and blues, and rock and roll were written off at first (Martin, 1993).



*Business as Usual:*

BS, Warner, RCA, Capitol-EMI, PolyGram, and MCA. These six America is a country with deep social scars. Although there are principles espoused, it has always been about business that often has sacrificed principle. In particular, some businesses take advantage of the poor, nowhere more fiercely than the music business (Dannen, 1990).

innovative but unproven music, these chieftains of the industry have a pattern of gaining interest in a specific genre of music only after products are proven

According to Fredric Dannen, author of *Hit Men*, the national bestseller and definitive history to date, the record industry comprised an unsavory group of hustlers and kingpins who ruled over a multi-billion-dollar business. Record companies easily exploited artist and controlled distribution. Artists were often coerced or forced into contracts that made them lose control of their own music. Black musicians, especially, were barred from radio because they were black and were forced to let white performers represent them (Dannen, 1990). Dannen provides a detailed profile of the handful of individuals who control the "Top Forty." His thorough, sure-footed investigation creates a lucid and understandable account of the music business past and makes present involvement look like business as usual.

Industry is fairly young, a little over 50 years old. It has experienced rapid growth—in 1955 the industry's total sales were about \$277 million; revenues have

In the early fifties, these "thugs" ran three large labels: RCA Victor, Decca, and Columbia. They were pioneers and deserve praise for their foresight but opprobrium for their lack of integrity (Dannen, 1990). As Dannen reveals, "Many of them were crooks and their victims were usually poor blacks though whites did not fare much better. It was a common trick to pay off a black artist with a Cadillac worth only a fraction of what was owed them." By the 70s, six "major" labels had begun to emerge as the oligarchs of the



record business: CBS, Warner, RCA, Capitol-EMI, PolyGram, and MCA. These six major labels were more influential than the minor labels because they did their own nationwide distribution. Writing off this innovative but unproven music, these chieftains of the industry have a pattern of gaining interest in a specific genre of music only after products are proven profitable. This in itself is not the most serious issue. It is the detrimental changes that seem to occur as a result of their involvement. A glaring example is the rock and roll industry. The major labels thought it would be a passing fad; then they “simply pulled out their checkbooks and purchased the independent labels and artist contracts outright” (Dannen, 1990). Artists, in particular the socially conscious rappers, were unhappy with the changes in social message because they started losing control of hip hop and even real input in the rap productions. They were displeased because they had little say in distribution and artistic expression.

Although the record industry is fairly young, a little over 50 years old, it has experienced rapid growth—In 1955 the industry’s total sales were about \$277 million; revenues have since increased over 2000 percent (*Hit Men*)—Dannen is right to caution us: “It is well we remember that today’s key record executives, lawyers, and managers are not even a generation removed from the founders, nor are they much different in their business approach” (*Hit Men*). As recent as 1987, Dannen notes, Roulette Records had a sign on the wall that read, *O LORD GIVE ME A BASTARD WITH TALENT!*



## *Rap Hits Mainstream*

The major labels of the music industry took notice of rap when profitability was recognized. They had one goal in mind, profit, and could have cared less about the original values of rap, as Bambaataa protests: "These companies find their business through appealing to sex and violence qualities" (2000). To these rappers, Bambaataa continues, this way of doing business perpetuated a slave mentality that is rampant in the music industry: "My talent and creativity under your control for your lion's share of the profit." Mainstream rap became clouded by commercialization from companies whose only goal was to sell merchandise. Chuck D, socially conscious rapper and Hip Hop activist writes, "The major labels are run by lawyers and accountants, if they could sell a hubcap with cheese for \$17.00 they would." Rap started to have a positive effect on the community, particularly in reducing gang activity (Davey D, 1991). But the music industry sabotaged these achievements by sensationalizing and glorifying street thug life.

Shockingly, the buyers of this mainstream crap were not black—they were white suburban teens. White Hip Hop activist Brian Bender explains the allure for white teens: "Most of us have never even been to the inner city...we enjoy the culture of fear that has been created around the inner city. We are titillated by the violent images presented to us...they are characters that have been created for our perverse enjoyment and we eat up, only vaguely aware that our country's economic discrepancies are being fueled by a fear of the ghettos that is fed to us through popular culture" (2000). In short, it's the attraction of Jerry Springer. They were rubber neckers glimpsing wrecked lives. David Samuels, Hip Hop historian, wrote an article in 1991 entitled, "The Rap on Rap" about the sordid



truths of mainstream America, well-known to rappers themselves, that, “the more rappers were packaged as violent black criminals, the bigger the white audience became.” In an article entitled, “Not for Men Only; Women Rappers are Breaking the Mold with a Message of their Own,” David Thigpen uncovers the industry’s formula for success: “producers were apprehensive about signing particular rappers because they feared tampering with their proven formula of success of producing macho male rappers. They wanted the requisite loudness and abrasiveness that they felt was the major feature of rap music.” Forced to follow formulas for success in order to get mainstream distribution, rap lost its soul. MC Shan, an Old School Rapper, does not hesitate to finger the cause of the devolution: “Rappers did not take things to another level; the companies took things to another level.”

It is hard to uncover the powerful, yet under-the-radar subversive influences that affected the Hip Hop culture. One theory is that right-wingers manufactured the conditions—moving drugs and guns into the ghetto via the wars in Central America—for a resurgence of gang warfare. McWhorter writes, “In 1996, Gary Webb wrote a three-part report for *The San Jose Mercury* describing how the Central Intelligence Agency had deliberately sold crack cocaine to dealers in South Central Los Angeles to fund the Nicaraguan contras in the 1980’s. Congresswoman Maxine Waters demanded further investigation of this incident claiming that the inner-city epidemic stemmed from this” (2001). Another theory is that the record industry gave birth to *gangsta rap*, a style of rap music usually characterized by violent, nihilistic, and misogynistic themes from or involving black street gangs, by funding the negative messages of west coast rap. Early on, one member



of the oldest west coast rap groups, Ice Cube, experienced the sheisty workings of the music industry and had this to say: "Don't trust no mother-fuckers because everybody in the industry is out to get you" (QD3, 2003). This public comment marks the beginnings of gangsta rap and the industry's shady involvement in it.

### *The Collision: Art and Business*

In the phenomenal series about Hip Hop history, producer Quincy Jones III wrote about the competition that once fueled old school rap creativity while maintaining artistic integrity and community:

The tension of competitive rivalries is often the key ingredient to creating art. A young Renaissance painter named Leonardo DaVinci engaged in a battle of words with the great master Michelangelo. Braque and Picasso were so similar in their style it was difficult to tell who painted what and thus created fierce competition. The traditionalist Brahms and the avant garde musician, Wagner, created a division among classical music enthusiasts where fights were known to break out before premieres. And long nights on the road would provide opportunities for musical warfare between Jazz greats, Byrd and Coltrane. One musical art-form born in the inner city, with roots in Jamaican dance hall music, embraced this spirit of competition like no other, creating a provocative world of words. It is called "Rapping." History shows competitiveness when using words, and, as a way of showing genius, Socrates and Aristotle debated in Greek society using their rhetoric. Debates are about a war of words. The concept of "one-upsmanship" is about how you manipulate words and move the crowd or convince people. (2003)

### *Contaminated Soil*

There is nothing new about music finding its roots in the anger and rebellion of young people or in older people expressing unrealistic fears about that music (Bowen, et al, 1997). The difference is the new generations of rap artists don't know where music ends and the streets begin, thereby confusing cause and effect. Outside forces in the ever increasing allure for financial reward put pressure on west coast artists to succeed at any cost. This pressure later spread to the New York City rappers.



beats, Ice Cube was the lyricist, and Eazy E was the front man or rapper who took  
Until the transition to gangsta rap, the inner city voice was being played below the radar  
of big business. Initially, east coast rappers were not getting the radio recognition they  
wanted but were keeping the control they wanted ...”then record companies took notice,  
financing increasingly violent lyrics while they raked in huge profits, all while ignoring  
the consequences of angering rappers from the streets” (QD3, 2003). Either record  
labels did not understand the destructive forces they unleashed or, being thugs [W.A.] with  
themselves, they cynically exploited them.

being dishonest with the handling of the group's money. When Ice Cube confronted the  
N.W.A, Niggas with Attitude, was one of the earliest Rap groups of the West Coast. The  
members had known affiliations with the notorious gang called the Bloods (QD3). Early  
out, the group produced and recorded the hit song, “Boys from the Hood.” An executive  
from a major label took notice, Jerry Heller of Priority Records. Bear in mind that, in the  
80s, this company became an offshoot of Capital-EMI records, founded in 1942, one of  
the top three record labels throughout the 50s and 60s, all with organized crime  
connections (*Hit Men*). A collision between art and business was inevitable.

### *Contaminated Soil*

The business of Rap music became increasingly like the streets, where artists brought the  
mentality of the streets into the “Rap game”: “. . . when you bring the streets into the  
game, the new players only know the rules of the streets” (QD3). This reality became  
evident in the split between the members of the gang/group N.W.A. This group  
originally had three lead members: Dr. Dre was the musical engineer who created the



beats, Ice Cube was the lyricist, and Eazy E was the front man or rapper who took direction from the other two. The initial problems began when Jerry Heller of Priority Records approached Eazy E and convinced him that he was the key to the group's success. Then he and Heller approached the group with a proposition--\$75,000 checks for each member if they signed a requisite six year contract under Mr. Heller's management. Ice Cube, one of the founding members of N.W.A., refused to sign the requisite contract, stating, "I caught Jerry and Eazy [an original member of N.W.A.] with their hand in the cookie jar." Ice Cube accused Mr. Heller and group member Eazy E of being dishonest with the handling of the group's money. When Ice Cube confronted the two about the issue he quotes their response as, 'Fuck you nigga, what you gon do, go solo' (QD3, 2003). It was known that, at this time (unlike the neighborhood Old School Rap scene with their small independent labels of the past), a solo artist without the financial backing of a record company was a sure failure in any mainstream arena. Everyone else in N.W.A. signed with Jerry Heller. However, Ice Cube did indeed go solo and sold half a million records in two weeks. He succeeded not because what was known about the industry at that time was not true, but because fans rallied to beat the system and support Ice Cube's success.

Beating the system was an ephemeral victory. N.W.A. retaliated using Ruthless Records, now under the auspices of Heller's Priority Records, to air the dirty laundry of the group by calling Ice Cube everything from a traitor to a phony. After several vicious attacks from N.W.A, Ice Cube responded with a vicious attack of his own, "No Vaseline":



boy ( God Damn I'm glad yall set it off...Livin with the whites, one big house, and not another nigga in sight...you are getting fucked out your green by a white boy...with no vaseline. If they [other members of the group] were as smart as me, Eazy E would be hanging from a tree... with no Vaseline, just a match and a little bit of gasoline...light him up burn him up (QD3, 2003).

Gone was playful competition and exaggeration. Gone were socially conscious messages. The industry's use of west coast gang members as performing artists avoided the "don't take it personal" mentality of the New York rappers. As a result, the west coast gang members began resolving conflicts how they resolved them on the street: with violence. Eazy-E boasted:

Some rappers try to rap about shit out here but they can't do it because they don't live it- they was not around it, but we can because we have been around it, and doing it all of our lives- killin, robbery, murders, thieving, gambling, dope dealing...everything you hear on our records is true. (QD3, 2003)

The viciousness increased, soon transforming artistic differences into the street warfare these west coast gangsta rappers knew all too well. New York rap artist Treach had this to say about publicized warring, "In early New York rap it was no disrespect, it was a thing of skills, but it is not that way with niggas from the street. West coast gangsta-rap emphasized skills on the street more than skills on the mike...a total contradiction to the early style of rappers." Street, gang and prison culture caused the dominant youth culture and effected a violent change about violence, in part, because of funding by record executives.

Ice Cube was only the first to fall away. Although he had signed originally, Dr. Dre found out on his own that Ice Cube had been right about Easy E and Heller: "the white



boy (Jerry Heller) came in and kind of fucked it up, he pulled Eazy-E to the side and he (Eazy-E) sold his soul” (QD3, 2003). Still a street survivor, Dr. Dre left the group to start “Death Row Records” along with known gang member Suge Knight. It is alleged that Dr. Dre and Suge visited Eazy-E with baseball bats to insure Dre’s release from Ruthless Records. In his interview with Davey D. on *Beef I*, Dr. Dre smiles while denying this claim. Dr. Dre got out of his contract (B.E.T., 2005). Gone were the suits and ties, and in came a new approach to conducting business. Journalist Kevin Powell interviewed Eazy-E before his death in the late 80’s, and he wrote, “Eazy-E was deeply hurt, he did not recover emotionally like Kool Mo Dee vs. Busy Bee or KRS-One vs. DJ Sham in early New York rap. It was the first time I thought; damn this is going in a different direction.” With big money at stake, lyrics became increasingly violent and personal, as Ice T, a West Coast, former gang member and one-time old school rapper, acknowledges: “It shifted into whose camp could take out whose if there was a confrontation, not who was the best rapper lyrically” (2003).

It is not clear whether or not it was the intent of Jerry Heller to “mess things up” or if he was aware of rap’s early beginnings. What is clear is that it was about the money. Hence, it was not important that the content sensationalized and cultivated violence, and it was not important that known felons were being funded to make it. Rap crews were actual gangs or emulated gangs. The crews were made up of 50% business men and 50% thugs. Owner of Def Jam records and leading Hip Hop activist Russell Simmons explains, “50% of your crew is made up of homeboys that just came home from jail, that thug element is always ready to reach out and touch anyone in order to earn their points or stripes [in



gang and prison culture]” (National Gang History, 2007). The rap business now provided a mic and finances to a disturbing new culture-prison sub-culture.

In 1987 Capital Records became the distributing label of Priority Records, whose parent company EMI was founded in 1985. From 1987 to 2001 the company has worked with artists N.W.A., Ice Cube, Master P, Snoop Dog, Mack 10, Westside Connection, Eazy-E, and Ice-T and has handled distribution for Ruthless Records, Death Row Records, and No Limit Records. The artists and the labels are documented in the series *Beef I & II* as feuding with one another. Guess who profited from the record sales of these feuds?

Gangsta rap may have started in the West, but spread very quickly coast to coast. New York rappers known for being jokey changed into street rappers, “Bottom line is I’m a crook with a deal, if my record don’t sell I’mma rob and steal...you better recognize nigga I’m straight from the street” (QD3, 2003). Tu Pac, one of rap’s icons, attended a school for the arts in Baltimore and was said to have the range to do Shakespeare.

Shakur openly admits to allowing early rap and later gangsta rap to influence his artistic expression. He tells his tale of lost innocence, “a ghetto fairy tale”: “In the black community you have no big brothers and you have no father. When I was growing up KRS-1, Big Daddy Kane and Public Enemy were my early influences later it was Ice Cube, N.W.A and them niggas out west who I listened to...that’s who I gauged my nuts by, so if Cube was saying how he was ‘knocking niggas off’...fuck it (so was I). Niggas out west told me ‘fuck these bitches’ and ‘I’m not fuckin’ with these ho’s” (2003).



The lyrical warring escalated to coast to coast beefs, not the jesting and besting of early New York. In *Beef I*, several artists commented together: "When you listen to brothers

battle and you listen to the lyrics they say, it is as if they are going at it like it is straight up Mafia threats: I will take your whole family out...I will kill your people...I will kill your mother and your sister and your girlfriend...I will tie up your mother and rape your daughter and throw your baby out the window...cut off your head and bowl it down the alley." Fifty-Cents admitted that what he says in his records, he says with all intentions of backing it up. He was a drug dealer who went to jail for ten years. Fifty Cent emerged from prison to become a successful mainstream rap artist. He continues to be notorious for his violent lyrics and his street approach to the business of rap music.

In an effort to regain the harmony once experienced in the mid 70s and early 80s, artists today are working toward social unity and core values. In 2007 socially conscious rappers still find it hard to get mainstream support. Rap Artist such as Public Enemy,

KRS-1, Kanye West, MC-Lyte, and Common just to name a few, are battling to bring the original values of rap back. There are rap summits, and educational seminars being held around the world, all in the name of rapping about rap. Old school rappers hope that by gaining control of distribution and production, artists can send out the socially conscious messages. They expect to find their audiences. The ability of artists to distribute using the internet will finally reveal what mainstream really wants to hear. As Russell Simmons envisions:

Hip Hop is a great monument to the achievement of oppressed people in this country. It would be a tragedy if Hip Hop were to be considered a negative element to society. It was created to give hope and happiness to the children of lower economical areas and teach them that fighting each other is not productive



intern... they must respect themselves and women...for Hip Hop to improve, we must work together and get back on the track it was designed for (Carroll, 2007).

original, playful old school rap. It remains to be seen which one gains the largest audience.

Chuck D feels the world has been programmed by marketing ploys. He feels that people believe that rap music is bad, and the bad-boy image sells. He has made it his mission to “deprogram” the world, using the example of the movie “The Matrix” to illustrate his point. He will play the part of Lawrence Fishburne, who played Morpheus, and reveal the true identity of rap. Chuck and other socially conscious rappers intend to take full advantage of new outlets the internet has provided: digital distribution. He states, “The buyers of radio and television keep Hip Hop and rap from dominating those surfaces and only let a few [musicians] rise to the top. This is much more democratic in the world of the Net. There is a changing of the guard as to how people will get their music” (Vognar, 2007).

This new distribution tool also may allow a new kind of rap to succeed on its own terms. This rap belongs to a sub-culture whose rapping has not been tainted by mainstream pressures, Deaf culture. It is known as Dip Hop. Dip Hop is a term that was coined by one of Gallaudet’s own, Warren “WA-WA” Snipes. In his words, it is Hip Hop through deaf eyes. WA-WA is not the first deaf rapper—there are battles regularly held in New York, Philadelphia, and one group in Houston Texas called the Ghetto Hand Boys. Currently, however, there are no mainstream deaf rappers. The artists use small independent labels and the internet to distribute their products. I interviewed Mr. Snipes regarding his vision for DIP-HOP (Interview Questions in Appendix A). These rappers might be an excellent test case for further research on the effects of success through



internet distribution. Within this sub-culture, rapping ranges from gangsta style to the original, playful old school rap. It remains to be seen which one gains the largest audience.

s to change rapidly. Social change, marked by social disorder and social instability, is inevitable. Unfortunately, this period of social change has placed Hip Hop culture under threat. The "every man for himself" is no longer a sentiment intended as an anti-white defense; instead it has backfired among the community as some rap members feel no social responsibility to the whole. There is division among its members. But this current reality need not be permanent.

Empowerment for the Hip Hop community comes with enlightenment: The telling of history and the sharing of events will guide the steps for the future. It has been argued here in this paper about what caused the destruction of the initial harmony and agreement of basic values among old school New York rappers. Currently most mainstream rap music is produced and distributed by Southern artists and distribution companies who perpetuate the degraded rap. Nonetheless, positive results are materializing because of this new nationwide approach to telling the rap story that evinces a rising tide of opposition to the current rap. And this movement is re-focusing attention on uplifting and connecting to a culture valuing social inclusiveness and cohesion. The continuation of Hip Hop culture will depend on the cooperation of its members. Cooperation in turn presumes a general consensus or agreement among the members regarding basic values. Knowledge, a value of Hip Hop, is now the key to re-directing a culture.



## *Conclusion*

Our world today is very different from that of the mid 70s and early 80s. And it continues to change rapidly. Social change, marked by social disorder and social instability, is inevitable. Unfortunately, this period of social change has placed Hip Hop culture under threat. The "every man for himself" is no longer a sentiment intended as an anti-white defense; instead it has backfired among the community as some rap members feel no social responsibility to the whole. There is division among its members. But this current reality need not be permanent.

Empowerment for the Hip Hop community comes with enlightenment: The telling of history and the sharing of events will guide the steps for the future. It has been argued here in this paper about what caused the destruction of the initial harmony and agreement of basic values among old school New York rappers. Currently most mainstream rap music is produced and distributed by Southern artists and distribution companies who perpetuate the degraded rap. Nonetheless, positive results are materializing because of this new nationwide approach to telling the rap story that evinces a rising tide of opposition to the current rap. And this movement is re-focusing attention on uplifting and connecting to a culture valuing social inclusiveness and cohesion. The continuation of Hip Hop culture will depend on the cooperation of its members. Cooperation in turn presumes a general consensus or agreement among the members regarding basic values. Knowledge, a value of Hip Hop, is now the key to re-directing a culture.



## Glossary

1. *Black Spades*-  
A gang originally known as the Savage Seven who came under the leadership of Afrika Bambaataa
2. *break-dancing*-  
To have sexual control over a "ho" (name used for girls who are was a style of dancing that grew up around Hip Hop music during its early stages of development in the United States
3. *crack dens*-  
establishments that are run-down and filthy, littered with ragged furniture, trash and graffiti. Crack-heads will stay for days. Female crack-heads will prostitute themselves in these locations (known as "rock" stars).
4. *crack-"rock"*-  
A name used for crack that describes how it looks
5. *dis*-  
To insult. Comes from disrespect.
6. *gang-banging*-  
Banger- Gang member;  
Bangin'-Gang fighting or violence; being in a gang
7. *graffiti art*-  
street art formats
8. *Hip Hop*-  
According to classic Hip Hop Rapper KRS-One, "Rap is something you do, Hip Hop is something you live." KRS famously broke Hip Hop culture down into 9 elements; break dancing (or street-dancing), emceeing or rapping, graffiti or writing, deejaying or DJing, making beats, street fashion, street language, street knowledge and street entrepreneurialism.



The culture in the late 70s and early 80s that spawned the graffiti culture as we know it now, break-dancing and Hip Hop music, which has since turned into modern Rap music.

9. *hustling-*

To earn one's living by illicit or unethical means.

10. *pimping-*

To have sexual control over a "ho" (name used for girls who are known to be around guys from the urban areas who provide sexual favors, and assistance with drug transactions) for the purpose of receiving street valuables.

11. *prison culture-*

An inmate social system that is formed as a reaction to various pains of imprisonment and deprivation inmates suffer in captivity. A total institution in which the individual, through a series of status degradation ceremonies gradually become socialized into prison life.

The combination of two dominate sub-cultures; inside world and outside world creating an increasingly unpredictable world in which prior loyalties, allegiances, and friendships are disrupted.

12. *rap-*

To talk rhythmically to the beat of rap music.  
To take the blame; punishment.

13. *Savage Seven-*

A group of seven teenage boys who began terrorizing the vicinity Around the Bronxdale Projects on Bruckner Boulevard in the Bronx.

14. *thug-*

A cutthroat or ruffian; a hoodlum.

15. *turf-*

A particular area used for or associated with a specific individual or activity.

16. *underground-*

Refers to music that is not mainstream. The term is also used to refer to a certain sound or feeling that one gets from that sound.



Appendix A

DIP-HOP

WA-WA- Wazoo

Alternative Hip Hop, a subgenre of rap. Alternative Hip Hop often includes artists on independent record labels and features socially conscious and politically oriented lyrics.

I- How do you define Hip-Hop?

W-

I- When was your first exposure to Hip-Hop?

W-

What was that exposure like?

W-

I- How do you define Old-School?

W-

I- Why Dip-Hop?

W-

I- How do you currently describe your artist?

W-

I- What is your opinion of Hip-Hop culture today?

W-

I- Do you recall any of your favorite Hip-Hop? If yes, Old School Rap or New School

Rap?



Appendix A

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