

Consider historically and critically a chosen genre of popular music.

Genre is a particular style that is recognizable by its particular subject or form. It is also a term which defines something that is produced according to a particular model. For example, when discussing media texts, it is apparent that some qualities of one may be associated with another. Within a media context, genre can generally be defined as being a “category or type”.¹ These categories are not necessarily fixed, and are subject to change. Shuker (1994) states that genres operate

...within a commercial system of record companies, contracts, marketing, publicity, management, support staff and so on; within this context bands tour and perform, make records, and create an image.²

This description is coherent with notions of music genres, which continue to function as “marketing categories and reference points for the musician and the fan.”³ The definition of genre that Shuker (1994) gives can be applied to the genre in question, which is that of Rap music. The genre of rap music operates within the given conventions, indicating at its position within a wider strategic area, namely that of popular culture.

In considering the rap music genre in a historical and critical sense, it is important to separate the concepts of rap music and hip-hop. It can be noted that although hip-hop is the subculture for this formation, it is actually rap music which is the genre under consideration in this essay. A music historian called Reebee Garafalo affirms this difference by stating that,

Rap music must be understood as one cultural element within a larger within a larger social movement known as hip-hop.⁴

Rap music as a musical form began among the youth of South Bronx, New York in the mid-1970s⁵. Individuals such as Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash were some of the early pioneers of this art form. Through their performances at clubs and promotion of the music, rap consistently gained in popularity throughout the rest of the 1970s.

The first commercial success of the rap song “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979 helped bring rap music into the national spotlight.⁶ The 1980s saw the continued success of rap music with many artists such as Run DMC (who had the first rap album to go gold in

1984)⁷, L. L. Cool J, Fat Boys, and the west coast rappers Ice-T and N.W.A (Niggers with Attitude) becoming popular.

Rap music was a way for youths in black inner city neighbourhoods to express what they were feeling, seeing, and living and it became a form of entertainment. Hanging out with friends, rapping and listening to others rap kept black youths out of trouble in the dangerous neighbourhoods in which they lived. The dominant culture did not have a type of music that filled the needs of these youth, so they created their own. Therefore, rap music emerged as a way “for [black] inner city youth to express their everyday life and struggles.”⁸ Rap is now seen as a genre that includes a large number of white middle to upper class youths, who have also come to support and appreciate rap music. Rose states that,

To suggest that rap is a black idiom that prioritises black culture and that articulates the problems of black urban life, does not deny the pleasure and participation of others.⁹

Many youth in America today are considered to be part of the rap subculture, because they share a common love for a type of music that combines catchy beats with rhythmic music and thoughtful lyrics to create songs with a distinct political stance. Rap lyrics are about the problems

rappers have seen, such as poverty, crime, violence, racism, poor living conditions, drugs, alcoholism, corruption, and prostitution. These are serious problems that many within the rap subculture believe are being ignored by mainstream America. Those within the rap subculture recognise and acknowledge that these problems exist. Those who are part of this subculture consider ‘the other’ to be those who do not understand rap music and the message rap artists are trying to portray. The suppressor, or opposition, is the dominant culture, because it has been argued that it ignores these problems and perhaps even acts as a catalyst for some of them.

A debated area in black music, is that of harmony versus rhythm. This constructed, binary opposition derives from the comparison made over many decades between Western classical and African-derived musics.¹⁰ In rap, there is an apparent emphasis on rhythm. The lyrics rely on the rhythm so that they can be understood in the way in which the ‘author’ of the lyrics has intended. There are many conventional areas in rap music. Within the songs, the lyrics and rhythm are of primary importance. Rap music uses rhyme to communicate its message to the listener. In rap, the rhymed word is normally found in the middle of a long

sentence, and “punctuated short phrases are worked against the meter of the baseline.”¹¹ The rhyme structure is so flexible that, unlike other poetic forms, it is possible to reconstruct these during the performance.

Rap music makes the voices of black people in America important, asserting the notion of black cultural expressionism, which is manifested through the narrative. The voice that presents the lyrics in rap music takes on the persona of a narrator or observer who is familiar with the way of life in the urban environment. The narrative aspect of the lyrics highlights issues of racial marginalisation of black people in America.¹² These issues are primarily those that are present in urban areas, and as a result invoke themselves in the rap narrative. In relaying these lyrics, the voice is seen as an “expressive instrument.”¹³ This ‘instrument’ is recognisable from the African tradition as it enables both the singer and the audience or listener to participate. In this way, rap music becomes a vehicle for black people to voice their opinions, and

...act out inversions of status hierarchies, and tell alternative stories of contact with the police and the education process.¹⁴

Therefore, the conventions of rap music help to give a true reflection of the society in which black Americans reside.

Although the listeners may be restricted because of their lack of understanding of the lyrics, Rap music is growing to become a global form of music, giving off energy, which may not be found to such an extent outside of this genre. While the vocalist [s] tell a story, the disc jockey provides the rhythm, operating the drum machine and ‘scratching’.

Scratching can be defined as “rapidly moving the record back and forth under the needle to create rap’s famous swishing sound.”¹⁵ The beat can be traditional funk or heavy metal; anything is possible with rap music. The most important part of rap is “rapping.” This music genre relies heavily on its lyrical content to attract its fan-base.

During every generation, there has been an attack on various sources of pleasure derived from music. In the 1950s, the target was on rock ‘n’ roll. Some people claimed that the new type of music encouraged wild behaviour and evil thoughts. In the same way, rap has constantly been scrutinised on the same charges. Those who condemn this exciting entertainment have never closely examined it. If this had been the case, it would become evident that rap permits kids to appreciate the English

language by producing comical and meaningful poems set to music. It has been suggested that rappers are able to construct these poems without any thought. Nelson suggests that “rappers like L. L Cool J grew up rapping in their neighbourhood, and they learned to throw down a quick rhyme when they were challenged.”¹⁶ In opposition to this, it is possible to argue that the words in these songs are carefully constructed lyrics, which are perfected in order to be associated with a certain style. As L. L Cool J describes it,

I write all my songs down by hand. Each song starts with a word, like any other sentence, and becomes a manuscript.”¹⁷

From its inception, rap endured a lot of hostility from listeners- many, but not all, White- who found the music too harsh, monotonous, and lacking in traditional melodic values. However, others- often, though not always, young African-Americans from underprivileged inner city backgrounds- found an immediate connection with the style. Rap was seen by such people as the language of the street, directly reflecting and addressing the day-to-day reality of the ghetto in a confrontational fashion not found in any other music or medium.

Rap music has been known to cause controversies. This can be explained by looking at music videos. Music videos have become far more important since the emergence of specialist music channels such as MTV. MTV has, over the years, increased its coverage of rap music videos. Rap has developed its own unique style and generic conventions. These videos tend to depict the neighbourhood, and position the rapper in this ghetto location.¹⁸

Many performers set a positive example for their followers. Kurtis Blow rapped in a video for the March of Dimes' fundraising drive to battle birth defects and he has campaigned against teenage drinking as a spokesperson for the National Council of Alcoholism. Run DMC is one of the numerous rap combinations advising children to keep off drugs. Doug E. Fresh and Grandmaster Flash have each made records telling of the horrors of cocaine. In Grandmaster Flash's hit "White Lies," he gives a detailed account of how the drug can ruin a life by shouting, "Don't do it!"

Many were still expecting the music to disappear before Run DMC appeared on the scene. Rap was, and to a large degree still is, a singles

orientated medium, but these men from Queens proved that rappers could maintain interest and diversity over the course of entire full-length albums. Combining hard beats and innovative production with material that emphasised positive social activism without ignoring the cruel realities of urban life, they found that both the critics and the ‘street’ were appreciating them. Run DMC were the first rap group to gain a serious entry into the pop charts. They also managed to attract a large white, middle class audience when they teamed up with Aerosmith’s Stephen Tyler and Joe Perry for the hit single “Walk This Way.” The mid and late 80s saw rap continue to increase in popularity, with the emergence of superstars such as L. L Cool J and MC Hammer (the latter is often accused of providing a safe rap-pop alternative). Although most early rap productions originated in New York and its surrounding areas, the music took hold as an American phenomenon with strong scenes developing in other East Coast cities such as Philadelphia, as well as West Coast strongholds in Los Angeles and Oakland.

While rap had always dealt with urban struggle, the late 1980s saw the emergence of a more militant strain of the music. Boogie Down productions laid down a prototype that was taken to more extreme

measures by N.W.A (Niggers With Attitude), who reported on the crime, sex and violence of the ghetto with an explicit verve that may have been verging on celebration rather than just highlighting these issues.¹⁹ The extreme controversies and popularity of N.W.A with record buyers lead several members of the band to continue their careers as solo artists. This included Ice-T, Easy-E and Dr Dre. The most popular and controversial of the militant rappers, the New York based Public Enemy, were perhaps the most political too. Their brand of activism, like that of Malcolm X's two decades earlier, made many people uncomfortable with their emphasis upon Black Nationalism and careless anti-Semitic, homophobic, and sexist references.²⁰ Groups such as Public Enemy ignited an ongoing debate in the media. Activist-orientated critics and audiences found a lot of praise in their music. At the same time, they could not let the xenophobic tendencies of these acts pass unnoticed, or ignore the frequent quasi-celebration in much rap music of misogyny, drugs, and violence, and the status to be gained in the urban community by the practice thereof. Passionate advocates of civil liberties and free speech wondered, sometimes aloud, whether rappers were taking those privileges too far.

Newly emerging gangsta rappers like Snoop Doggy Dog, Slick Rick, and 2Pac not only take the violent subject matter of their lyrics to new extremes (and to the top of the charts), but have been accused of enacting their scenarios in real life. This has resulted in these rappers landing themselves in jail for manslaughter or fighting similarly grave charges. These performers often unrepentantly contend they are only reporting things as they happen in the neighbourhood, of a culture that not only shoots people, but is also being shot at. Rose states that,

Police brutality, racism, and harassment form the political core of male rappers' social criticism, and lyrics that effectively and cleverly address these issues carry a great deal of social weight in rap music.²¹

Many critics find their line between art and reality to be too thin, and hate to see them spreading their gospel from the top of the charts. An example of this is when 2Pac's 1995 album "Me Against The World" debuted at number one, even as he was serving a prison sentence. Although gangsta rap has created many headlines in recent years, the field of rap as a whole remains diverse and not as dominated as it seems by the "shoot-'em-out" minidramas of gangsta rap.

De La Soul took rap and hip-hop productions to new heights with their 1989 debut “Three Feet High and Rising,” and almost psychedelic sampling and editing of a wildly eclectic pool of sources that would make Frank Zappa proud. Their humorous and cheerful vibe inspired a mini-school of “Afrocentric” acts, most notably the Jungle Brothers and A Tribe Called Quest. Arrested Development, Digable Planets, and Digital Underground also pursued playful, heavy jazz and funk-orientated paths to immense success and high critical praise.

The work of rap is a highly ‘macho’ (some would say sexist) environment, but some female performers arose to provide a much needed counterpoint from various perspectives: the ‘saucy’ (the various Roxannes), the pop (Salt ‘n’ Pepa), and the feminist (Queen Latifah). Rap music has been characterised as being sexist. Although the issues that are dealt with may be true, rappers do have a tendency to create and elaborate on stories about “abuse and domination of young black women.”²²

It is a measure of rap’s huge influence that the style has infiltrated mainstream soul and rock as well. Producer Teddy Riley gave urban-

contemporary performers like Bobby Brown a vaguely hip edge with his brand of “New Jack Swing”; white alternative rockers like G. Love, and most notably Beck, devised a strange hybrid of rap, blues and rock. Vanilla Ice probed that Whitbread pop-rap could top the charts, though he was unable to sustain his success.

More than most genres’, rap/hip-hop has become a culture with its own sub-genres and buzzwords which can seem almost impenetrable to the novice. Despite this proliferation of schools of production and performance, many rap records can appear virtually indistinguishable from each other to a new listener. It is evident that there are many rap records available on the market.

...The market is saturated with repetitive beats and monotonously uncompromising slices of urban street life, to the point that they have lost a lot of both their musical novelty and shock value.²³

Rap music has not lost its momentum, and scenes continue to proliferate, not just on the coasts, but in Atlanta, Houston, and such unlikely locales as Paris. It may appeal more to inner-city adolescents than anyone else may, but gangsta rap may be bigger than anything else in R ‘n’ B music commercially, and there is now an increasing number of multi-platinum

rap/hip-hop acts. Shinehead, Shaba Ranks and less heralded performers like Sister Carol have fused reggae and rap.

Rap is still a new music form. It is constantly expanding, and the sound has grown wide enough to include scores of future stars. Some rap is rock-based, some is funk, and some is very close to the original “street” sound. A few of the present stars will definitely have a noticeable impact on the future of rap. Themes that are more and more in rap lyrics: pride in an African heritage and the call for harmony between men and women. Queen Latifah and MC Lyte are working hard to open doors for women in the music business. Rap fans are also starting to accept more white artists, such as Eminem.²⁴

Rap has already shown signs of crossing over to a new audience. A Grammy category was added for rap music in 1989, and D.J Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince were the first winners of this for their single, “Parents Just Don’t Understand.” To further prove the point, Tone Loc became the first rapper ever to reach number one in the pop charts in 1989, with his single “Wild Thing.”

Along with the birth and growth of rap, comes the issue of censorship. This has become a big issue within the music industry, and rap music is at the centre of controversy. It is now becoming common practice for certain rappers' albums to appear with a warning sign and many newspapers and magazines have printed articles warning of the bad influence of rap. There are different aspects, which are seen to be disturbing. Some rappers use strong language, whilst others are accused of writing racist lyrics, or lyrics that are insulting to women.

In conclusion, rap like many other black forms of expression, speak to the public through acknowledging the “cries of pain, anger, sexual desire, and pleasure.”²⁵ The power of the language of rap has enabled this genre to expand on a global scale, enabling rap music to transcend its reputation as being a genre confined to the black communities of America. As a result, rap has become a genre, which should be recognised by its fusion of orality and post-modern use of technology. Overall, in order to retain a sense of black culture, rap has become a dominant genre within popular culture. At the same time, most rappers have resisted any type of commercialisation that others may have not recognised. It is this

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commercialisation which eminently leads to the existence of rap music as
a popular genre.

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Endnotes

¹ Shuker, 1994, p.145.

² Shuker, 1994, p. 146.

³ Shuker, 1994, p. 146.

⁴ Rose, 1994, p. 25.

⁵ Rose, 1994, p. 2.

⁶ www.bus.miami.edu/Idouglas/house/shill/ = This is a homepage dedicated to the pioneers of rap, Sugar Gang Hill, giving details of the band's history, albums and other related details.

⁷ Rose, 1994, p. 3.

⁸ Shaomari, 1995, p. 17.

⁹ Rose, 1994, p. 4.

¹⁰ Rose, 1994, p. 65.

¹¹ Rose, 1994, p. 88.

¹² Rose, 1994, p. 3.

¹³ Rose, 1994, p. 66.

¹⁴ Rose, 1994, p. 101.

¹⁵ Small, 1992, p. 12.

¹⁶ Nelson & Gonzales, 1991, p. 135.

¹⁷ Nelson &Gonzales, 1991, p. 137.

¹⁸ Rose, 1994, p. 11.

¹⁹ Baker, 1993, p. 33.

²⁰ Rose, 1994, p. 4.

²¹ Rose, 1994, p. 106.

²² Rose, 1994, p. 15.

²³ Rose, 1994, p. 160.

²⁴ Baker, 1993, p. 62.

²⁵ Rose, 1994, p. 19.

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