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Source: *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 90, No. 3, The History of Hip Hop (Summer, 2005), pp. 190-195

Published by: Association for the Study of African-American Life and History, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20063997>

Accessed: 27/10/2009 14:22

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INTRODUCTION: HIP HOP IN HISTORY: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Derrick P. Alridge and James B. Stewart*

Over the past three decades, Hip Hop has developed as a cultural and artistic phenomenon affecting youth culture around the world. For many youth, Hip Hop reflects the social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions of their lives, speaking to them in a language and manner they understand. As a result of both its longevity and its cogent message for many youth worldwide, Hip Hop cannot be dismissed as merely a passing fad or as a youth movement that will soon run its course. Instead, Hip Hop must be taken seriously as a cultural, political, economic, and intellectual phenomenon deserving of scholarly study, similar to previous African American artistic and cultural movements such as the Blues, Jazz, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements. The essays in this special issue undertake such scholarly historical analysis of Hip Hop.

According to many Hip Hop aficionados, Hip Hop culture consists of at least four fundamental elements: Disc jockeying (DJing), break dancing, graffiti art, and rapping (emceeing).¹ Since its emergence in the South Bronx and throughout the northeast during the early and mid-1970s, Hip Hop has encompassed not just a musical genre, but also a style of dress, dialect and language, way of looking at the world, and an aesthetic that reflects the sensibilities of a large population of youth born between 1965 and 1984.² This broad characterization of Hip Hop may seem imprecise to some, but it reflects the Hip Hop community's refusal to be singularly defined or categorized, and demonstrates the dynamic nature of Hip Hop as a phenomenon that many hip hoppers believe must be felt, experienced, and communicated.

Since Hip Hop's birth about 35 years ago, very few academic historical studies have examined the phenomenon. It has been over a decade since the publication in 1994 of Tricia Rose's now classic, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* and Robin D. G. Kelley's *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. Rose's treatise was the first to provide an extensive historical study of Hip Hop. While focusing primarily on rap music, Rose examined the historical development of Hip

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Hop and its impact on youth culture, and she anticipated many of the present-day discussions about black female rappers. While Kelley's study did not focus solely on Hip Hop, he linked Hip Hop to black history and located Hip Hop along a continuum of black working-class culture. Rose and Kelley's works remain invaluable in the field of Hip Hop history and have helped lay a solid foundation for contemporary historians' investigations of Hip Hop.³

The most recent historical study on Hip Hop at the time of this writing is journalist Jeff Chang's huge 500-page work, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*. Literary in style, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* offers an engaging text filled with valuable historical data. Based on many interviews, Chang's work offers an oral and narrative history of Hip Hop and is destined to become a classic in the field of Hip Hop studies.⁴

A number of other works have also contributed immensely to providing an historical foundation for the scholarly study of Hip Hop. David Toop's *Rap Attack 3* is an updated version of his classics *Rap Attack 1* and *Rap Attack 2*. One of the earliest historical analyses of Hip Hop, Toop's volume traces Hip Hop history through personal interviews with the movement's pioneers. *Rap Attack 3* brings Toop's trilogy up to 1999 and provides a somewhat nostalgic reflection of 1970s and 1980s Hip Hop. Lacking the rich historical contextualization and insightful interpretive frameworks of Rose and Kelley's texts, Toop's volume provides an interpretation that seems in sync with Hip Hop, mainly because much of the text was written in close contact with the Hip Hop community. Another similar work is Alex Ogg's, *The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap*. Based on many personal interviews, Ogg presents a narrative history through the voices of hip hoppers from the past to the present. For many novice readers on the topic of Hip Hop, Ogg's brief biographies and glossary at the end of the book are helpful.⁵

Historian James G. Spady's oral histories and interviews of hip hoppers also provide firsthand accounts of individuals whose lives and careers have shaped and been shaped by Hip Hop. His volumes include interviews with Afrika Bambaataa, Kool Herc, LL Cool J, MC Lyte, Salt-n-Pepa, and many other icons of the Hip Hop community. Such interviews have been particularly valuable given the limited availability of and access to archival documents and other primary sources on Hip Hop. Spady's collections of oral histories include *Nation Conscious Rap*, *Twisted Tales: In the Hip Hop Streets of Philly*, and *Street Conscious Rap*.⁶

Equally important is Jim Fricke and Charlie Ahearn's *Yes, Yes, Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip Hop's First Decade*. This well-organized volume includes interviews with such early hip hoppers as Afrika Bambaataa, Afrika Islam, and Grand Wizard Theodore, among others. The text also presents photographs from the early Hip Hop era, which provide excellent primary source material for Hip Hop historians.⁷

A helpful volume edited by Alan Light, *The Vibe History of Hip Hop*, presents a collection of essays that covers the history of Hip Hop. While the text leaves some gaps in Hip Hop history, it is nevertheless effective in

highlighting some of the major events and artists of the Hip Hop generation. *The Vibe History* also provides chronologically arranged essays by some of the major writers on Hip Hop and youth culture, including Danyel Smith, Greg Tate, and Light himself.

A number of other books present Hip Hop's history through photography. One of the earliest such works is Steven Hager's *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti*. Hager's work is extremely important because it provides some of the earliest details about break dancing and graffiti, two elements of Hip Hop that have not received as much attention as rap music. Ernie Paniccioli's volume *Who Shot Ya?* also provides a vivid pictorial history of Hip Hop from its early years to the present. Like other historical data, the photographs in Hager and Paniccioli's works are valuable primary sources that convey firsthand accounts of the history and imagery of Hip Hop⁸.

William Eric Perkins's *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* extends some of the themes in the Rose and Kelley works. The essays in this volume, however, also fill gaps in Hip Hop studies by exploring largely neglected issues such as Hip Hop in Latino and Puerto Rican communities, Hip Hop and dance, and the connections between Hip Hop and sports.⁹ Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal's *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader*, a collection of essays written by academics and journalists, provides an historiography that covers almost the whole range of subjects encompassed in Hip Hop studies. The book features essays by scholars from a variety of disciplines, including Michael Eric Dyson, Paul Gilroy, Robin D. G. Kelley, David Toop, Joan Morgan, Tricia Rose, Mark Anthony Neal, Murray Forman, S. Craig Watkins, and many others.¹⁰

Other important works that provide social critique or literary analysis of Hip Hop include Houston Baker's *Blacks Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, Russell A. Potter's *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of the Postmodern*, Michael Eric Dyson's *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture and Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*, Todd Boyd's *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond*, Nelson George's *hip hop america*, Bakari Kitwana's *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, Mark Anthony Neal's *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, Murray Forman's *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, Yvonne Bynoe's *Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture*, and Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. The literature on Hip Hop is expanding each year and new texts continue to add to our understanding of the movement. This introduction is meant to provide an overview of many of the major works that have helped provide the intellectual grounding for our analysis of the history of Hip Hop.¹¹

This Special Issue of *The Journal of African American History* seeks to contribute to the scholarship on Hip Hop by examining the movement within

the historical context of the African American experience. The featured essays examine both the history of Hip Hop and the role of Hip Hop in African American history. Basically, the authors are concerned with investigating the connections between Hip Hop and previous social and intellectual movements; the history of social and political ideas in Hip Hop; Hip Hop and gender in African American history; and Hip Hop's relationship to a variety of contemporary social ideas and theories. In addition, although we recognize that Hip Hop is an international phenomenon, the essays in this Special Issue focus primarily on Hip Hop's origins and development within the United States.

We also acknowledge that much Hip Hop, like earlier African American art and cultural forms and those of many other ethnic minority groups, has been commodified by what Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno called "the culture industry," which has distributed Hip Hop to the masses in ways that reinforce historical stereotypes about African Americans by highlighting sexist, misogynistic, and nihilistic lyrics and images.¹² Some of the essays in this volume specifically examine aspects of this problem. However, this collection also offers complex interpretations of Hip Hop that often defy and challenge the negative images promulgated by mainstream commercial media. Our purpose here is to offer critical, scholarly, and balanced analyses of Hip Hop within the context of African American history, building on the solid foundation of scholarly historical work that has already been produced.

In the first essay, "Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop," James B. Stewart challenges notions from some artists of the Hip Hop generation that Rhythm and Blues (R & B) was a politically vacuous musical form that failed to engage the social justice and community issues of the 1970s. Examining R & B lyrics from the 1970s, and drawing on the perspectives of such scholars such as Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke, Stewart presents an historically derived theoretical framework that helps to illuminate various political ideas and messages in R & B. In illustrating the role of earlier musical forms in nurturing political consciousness, Stewart's essay shows the fertile ground from which Hip Hop musical forms were able to grow and flourish.

In the second essay "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas," Derrick P. Alridge engages the pressing problem of generational tensions between the civil rights and Hip Hop generations. Alridge argues that socially and politically conscious Hip Hop shares common ideas and ideology with the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement and the larger Black Freedom Struggle. By illuminating the shared ideas and ideology of the two generations, Alridge attempts to identify common ground as a means of encouraging dialogue between the civil rights and Hip Hop generations and forging collaborations and coalitions to address the ongoing liberation struggles of African American and other historically oppressed people.

In their essay, "Oppositional Consciousness within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976–2004," Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Stephens offer a feminist and womanist analysis of female rappers and their lyrics, and question traditional ways of thinking about women's empowerment. This essay traces womanist and feminist ideas in the lyrics of female rappers and shows the dialectical and oppositional manner in which black women's ideas about themselves and their relationships with men often materialize in Hip Hop. The authors reject the idea that female rappers merely reinforce negative and misogynistic ideas about women, arguing that female rappers offer a "street-level" interpretation of black women's realities. Such interpretations, the authors argue, expand womanist and feminist ways of thinking by redefining and reinventing ways of articulating liberatory possibilities for a broad segment of women, particularly African American women.

In her essay "In Search of the 'Revolutionary Generation': (En)gendering the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism," Charise Cheney offers a fresh analysis of the so-called Golden Age of Rap, the years from 1988 to 1993. Moving beyond a tendency to merely praise the progressiveness of rappers of this era, Cheney illuminates the homophobic and sexist language and analyzes the mindset of black nationalist rappers or "raptivists." Such language and ideas, Cheney argues, have a long historical lineage in black nationalist rhetoric and thought. Cheney's essay extends the notion of black nationalism beyond the idea of a geographical and physical nation-state and shows the manifestation of Hip Hop as a type of black consciousness and ideology that exhibits many of the positive and negative attributes of classical black nationalism.

The concluding essay "'Of All Our Studies, History Is Best Qualified to Reward Our Research': Black History's Relevance to the Hip Hop Generation" by Pero G. Dagbovie provides a much needed historiography of black history for the Hip Hop generation. Dagbovie calls on the Hip Hop generation to study African and African American history to help guide them toward a better understanding of Hip Hop in black history. He also encourages Hip Hoppers to use Hip Hop as a tool for disseminating black history to the masses. Praising the pragmatism of historians such as Carter G. Woodson, John Hope Franklin, Darlene Clarke Hine, and others, Dagbovie argues that historians of the Hip Hop generation should write in popular magazines such as *Vibe*, *XXL*, and *Ebony* to reach the Hip Hop generation and to bring about a renaissance in the study of black history.

We hope the essays in this special issue will inspire historians as well as scholars from a broad variety of disciplines to conduct historical research on Hip Hop. We encourage scholars to expand their efforts to include collecting oral histories of Hip Hop, identifying and preserving artifacts that document the evolution of Hip Hop, and developing flexible and historically derived frameworks through which to examine Hip Hop. In this way, our goal is not only to contribute to and advance the scholarly discourse in the field of Hip

Hop studies, but also to play an active role in helping preserve Hip Hop for future generations.

NOTES

We would like to thank Gloria Harper-Dickinson, past President of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and V. P. Franklin, Editor of *The Journal of African American History*, for their encouragement and support for this Special Issue. Thanks also to V. P. Franklin for working diligently with us on the issue and for his support in bringing this project to fruition.

¹Over the years, hip hoppers and scholars have identified additional activities as elements of Hip Hop.

²According to Bakari Kitwana, the Hip Hop generation is comprised of those born between 1965 and 1984 who identify with the language, culture, and music associated with Hip Hop. For practical purposes, we accept this periodization, but we do not exclude those born before 1965 and after 1984 who embrace Hip Hop culture.

³Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middleton, Connecticut, 1994); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994).

⁴Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York, 2005).

⁵David Toop, *Rap Attack 3: African Rap to Global Hip-Hop* (Blacstock Mews, London, 2000) and Alex Ogg with David Upshal, *The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap* (New York, 1999).

⁶Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady, eds., *Nation Conscious Rap* (New York, 1991); James G. Spady, Stefan DuPree, and Charles G. Lee, eds., *Twisted Tales: In the Hip Hop Streets of Philly* (Philadelphia, PA, 1995), and James G. Spady, Charles G. Lee, and H. Samy Alim, eds., *Street Conscious Rap* (Philadelphia, PA, 1999).

⁷Jim Frick and Charlie Ahearn, eds., *Yes, Yes, Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

⁸Ernie Panicioli and Kevin Powell, eds., *Who Shot Ya?: Three Decades of Hip Hop Photography* (New York, 2002); Steve Hager, *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti* (New York, 1984).

⁹William Eric Perkins, ed., *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia, PA, 1996).

¹⁰Alan Light, ed., *The Vibe History of Hip Hop* (New York, 1999); Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That's the Joint!: The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (New York, 2004).

¹¹Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago, 1995); Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of the Postmodern* (New York, 1995); Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York, 1996); Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington, IN, 1997); Nelson George, *hip hop america* (New York, 1998); Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York, 2002); Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York, 2002); Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT, 2002); Yvonne Bynoe, *Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture* (Brooklyn, NY, 2004); Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham, NC, 2004). For a very useful source book on Hip Hop, see Vladimir Bogdanov et al., eds., *Hip-Hop: The Definitive Guide to Rap & Hip-Hop* (San Francisco, CA, 2003).

¹²See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972), 120–21. For a concise and useful discussion of the culture industry, see John Story, *An Introduction to Cultural Theory & Popular Culture* (Athens, GA, 1998), 104–115. For a discussion of the concept of the culture industry and black music and culture, see Ellis Cashmore, *The Black Culture Industry* (London, 1997).