

The Evolution of Rap Music in the United States

by
Henry A. Rhodes

Contents of Curriculum Unit 93.04.04:

[Narrative](#)

[Lesson Plan #1](#)

[Lesson Plan #2](#)

[Lesson Plan #3](#)

[Teacher/Student Bibliography](#)

[Films](#)

[Rap Records](#)

[To Guide Entry](#)

Rap music is truly an American minority artist creation of which students need to be proud. Unfortunately, rap music is not perceived by many Americans as an art form, but as a fad which they hope will soon fade away. One of my intentions with my unit is to show that rap music is not a fad, but a musical art form that has been around for over 20 years in the United States. In fact, one can trace the history of rap back to the West African professional singers/storytellers known as Griots. However, it is not my intention to discuss in my unit the connection between the Griots and American rap music. Although, I will assign my students the task of doing a brief report on the African Griots prior to beginning my unit to help illustrate to my students that rapping has a long and illustrious history. I strongly suggest that anyone using my unit do the same. My unit is intended for middle school or high school students who are studying American history.

One can not study American rap music without studying what is known as the 'Hip Hop' culture. Rap is an integral part of this subculture that did not evolve or exist in isolation from its other major components. Thus, one of my unit objectives will be to not only discuss and study rap music but also the other major parts of this subculture. 'Hip Hop' culture was also comprised of graffiti, break dancing, and the attitude and dress of the people who subscribed to the mores and traditions of this subculture. Another objective of my unit will be to examine the influence Jamaican music had on American rap music. Finally, I intend to examine some of the major American rap artists and their styles and the technology which played a major role in the evolution of rap music in the United States.

According to my research all sources seem to point to the Bronx in New York City as the origin for the 'Hip Hop' culture. The first major component of this subculture I wish to explore is the graffiti aspect. Prior to discussing this aspect students need to know what conditions or events existed in the Bronx which fostered the development of the 'Hip Hop' culture. Steven Haver in his book, "Hip Hop; the Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music and Graffiti," states that there were three major events which took place in the Bronx which led to the birth of this

subculture. First, in 1959 Parks Commissioner Robert Moses began building an expressway through the heart of the Bronx. As a result, the middle class Italian, German, Irish, and Jewish neighborhoods disappeared overnight. In addition, businesses and factories relocated and left this borough. (I intend on having a map of New York City available to show my students where the Bronx is located at this point in my unit. I also plan on writing to the city of New York to inquire if a map exists which depicts the Bronx and the expressway construction back in 1959. I would advise anyone using my unit to do the same.) These exiting middle classes and businesses were replaced by poor black and Hispanic families. Accompanying these poor people were crime, drug addiction, and unemployment.

The second major event which occurred once again under the direction of Parks Commissioner Robert Moses would siphon off a majority of what was left of the middle class in the Bronx. This event occurred in 1968 with the completion of a 15,382 unit co-op apartment complex on the northern edge of the Bronx near an expressway. This project fostered and accelerated the Bronx middle class exodus from comfortable and well-kept apartments. As a result of the skyrocketing vacancy rates reputable landlords began selling out to professional slumlords. As a consequence of this action the Bronx deteriorated into a neighborhood with many unkept and vacant buildings.

The Bronx in this deteriorating condition fell prey to the third major event which led to the direct development of the graffiti aspect of the 'Hip Hop' culture. This event occurred in 1968 and coincided with Robert Moses' second major project in the Bronx, the Co-Op City. It should be noted that these last two events were not related. This third event involved a group of seven teenage boys who began terrorizing the vicinity around the Bronxdale Project on Bruckner Boulevard in the southeast Bronx. This may not seem important, but this group of teenagers laid the groundwork for a surge of street gang activity that would overwhelm the Bronx for the next six years. This group at first called itself the Savage Seven, but as more members joined, the group changed its name to the Black Spades. Overnight street gangs appeared on every corner of the Bronx. It should be noted that Afrika Bambaataa (who from time to time in my unit will be referred to as Bam), who had a tremendous effect on rap music and the 'Hip Hop' culture and who will be discussed at length in another section of my unit, was a member and leader of the Black Spades at one time. I bring this point up to illustrate that many rappers in the 'Hip Hop' subculture were gang members at some time in their life.

Gangs in New York reached their peak in 1973, so states Steven Hager in his book. The Black Spades, one of the largest streetgangs in New York, started to decline after this period. According to Bam, some gangs got into drugs, others got wiped out by rival gangs, while others became so large that members did not want to be involved anymore. Bambaataa went on to say that girls got tired of the gang life and wanted to start to raise children. Times were changing, with the advent of the seventies people were getting into music and dancing and going to clubs. One legacy of the gangs which affected the 'Hip Hop' culture was gang graffiti. Nobody really knows how graffiti evolved, but we know that it has been around for a long time. It goes as far back as during World War II when someone wrote "Kilroy was here" in a startling number of places in our country and abroad. During the fifties streetgangs used graffiti for self-promotion, marking territorial boundaries and intimidation.

However, around 1969 something changed and graffiti became a way of life with its own code of behavior, secret gathering places, slang, and esthetic standards for hundreds of New York City youths according to Steven Hager in his book. No one knows who started graffiti during this era but we do know who made it famous. It was TAKI 183. TAKI 183 was a teenager from Greece named Demetrius. Demetrius was first influenced when he saw "Julio 204" written on a street. Julio was a teenager who lived on 204th Street. Demetrius took his nickname which was Taki and placed it front of the street on which he lived, 183rd Street. Thus, the tag name TAKI 183 was created. Demetrius proceeded to write his tag name in as many places as he could find.

Graffiti writing was mainly written with spray paint until the invention of the magic markers in the sixties. The magic marker helped the spread of graffiti writing because it was easier to conceal and at the same time left an indelible mark on just about any surface as did the spray paint.

At first graffiti writing was limited to just artists writing their tag names. Some examples of some famous tag names in NYC other than TAKI 183 were SLY II, LEE 163d, PHASE 2, and TRACY 168. There was a large group of graffiti writers who attended DeWitt Clinton High School which was located across the street from a Transit Authority storage yard. The subway system was a main target of the early graffiti writers. A common meeting place was a coffee shop near DeWitt on W. Mosholu Parkway. Whenever a bus pulled up outside, dozens of writers would descend upon it and write their tags on it. It is even evident today that some graffiti writers are still into writing their tag names by walking through any neighborhood in New York, or in fact by even walking through certain sections of New Haven. One activity I plan on having my students to do is to canvas the Fair Haven neighborhood looking for graffiti tag names written on buildings, sidewalks, etc. It might be difficult for students to find out who these graffiti artists are in their neighborhood because it is part of the graffiti writers' code not to reveal their real names except to other graffiti writers.

Style is one of the most important aspects in graffiti writing. One could gain respect and recognition by getting one's name around in large quantities, but it was more prestigious to create an original lettering style. One graffiti writer who did this in 1972 was an artist known as Super Kool. Super Kool replaced the narrow dispersion cap on his spray paint with a wider spraying cap found on a can of oven cleaner. Graffiti writers who imitated the writing styles of others were known as "toys". According to the graffiti artist PHASE II in Steven Hager's book, stealing spray paint went along with the graffiti lifestyle. As you can see, as graffiti writing developed so did a code dictating behavior and style.

As the graffiti aspect of the 'Hip Hop' subculture developed, graffiti writing groups started to form. One of the most revered and earliest group to form was the Ex-Vandals. Another famous group was the Independent Writers who had Super Kool as a member. Independent Writers indicated their affiliation with their group by writing 'INDS' after their tags or signatures. Another graffiti writing group that deserves mentioning is a group called Wanted which was founded by TRACY 168 in 1972. Tracy was a streetwise white kid who was so tough that he was allowed to hang out with the Black Spades. What made the group the Wanted unusual was that they had a permanent clubhouse in the basement of an apartment complex on the corner of 166th Street and Woodcrest Avenue in the Bronx. At its peak in the seventies the Wanted had over seventy members. Some other important graffiti writing groups which existed in NYC were the Magic, Inc., the Three Yard Boys, the Vanguarders, the Ebony Dukes, the Writers Corner 188, The Bad Artists, the Mad Bombers, the Death Squad, the Mission Graffiti, the Rebels, the Wild Style, the Six Yard Boys, and the Crazy 5. Membership was not exclusive, some graffiti artists belonged to several groups.

Graffiti reached a new peak of activity during 1976 when whole subway car murals started to appear more frequently. The graffiti artist Lee Quinones became well known for his subway car murals. The Transit Authority did not view these murals as works of art. In 1977 the Transit Authority established a giant subway car wash at its Coney Island train yard at annual cost of \$400,000. This discouraged many graffiti artists who were into subway train murals. At this subway car wash the cars were sprayed with large amounts of petroleum hydroxide. After which, the graffiti murals and writings were buffed off. The graffiti artists referred to the spray as 'Orange Crush' which they named after the defoliant 'Agent Orange' which was used in Vietnam. The smell from this spraying caused many people who came into contact with it to become nauseous. Some graffiti artists tried to counter this process known as 'buffing' by using a better quality of spray paint which they covered with a clear enamel. This was not effective because the Transit Authority found out that in order to counter this new technique, all they had to do was run the trains through the 'buffing' process several more times.

Lee Quinones had a better solution to the 'buffing' process. Quinones abandoned painting his murals on the subway trains and started painting his murals on handball courts. It should be noted that handball court painting originated with TRACY 168 but it was Quinones who was known primarily for painting these courts. Quinones court murals mingled cartoon imagery with a strong moral sensibility. One mural pleaded for end to the arms race. Another mural

portrayed a ten foot tall Howard the Duck emerging from a trash can with the inscription: "If art like this is a crime, let God forgive me."

These graffiti muralists painted for the pure pleasure without ever attempting to earn money from their art. One day, Fred Brathwaite, a graffiti artist himself, approached Quinones about painting murals for money. Quinones thought that this was a good idea and together with Brathwaite formed a graffiti mural group known as the Fab 5. The other members were Lee, Doc, and Slave. In the February 12, 1979 issue of the Village Voice in an article by Howard Smith this group advertised that they were available to paint murals at a cost of \$5 per square foot. Smith asked Brathwaite, "Are you kidding? Most people I know in this city are trying to get rid of you spray can freaks!" Brathwaite responded by telling Smith that graffiti art is the purest form of New York art ever created. Brathwaite went on to say in this article that it was obvious that the Fab 5 was influenced by such new wave artists as Warhol, Crumb, and Lichtenstein. Brathwaite said this knowing that graffiti muralists were not influenced by these new wave artists let alone the fact that many graffiti artists were unaware of these new wave artists. Brathwaite made this statement because he realized the importance of connecting graffiti art with the hip downtown New York art scene, especially Andy Warhol. Smith's article attracted the attention of an Italian art dealer by the name of Claudio Bruni. Bruni contacted Brathwaite and invited the Fab 5 to submit five canvases for an art show in Rome. The five canvases sold for a thousand dollars apiece.

There were three other contacts with the legitimate art world at this time that should be noted according to the author Steven Hager. The first involved Stephan Eins, owner of the gallery Fashion Moda. Eins cultivated a relationship with local graffiti artists because he was looking for a new direction to go in other than what was socially acceptable at the time. Graffiti art fit the bill. The second contact involved Sam Esses, a Park Avenue art collector. When Esses found out that there was an European interest in graffiti art via his contact with Claudio Bruni, he decided to pursue this art form. Graffiti's third contact with the legitimate art world was via Henry Chalfant, a sculptor who had been taking pictures of graffiti during this period. Chalfant approached Ivan Karp of O.K. Harris Gallery about exhibiting his graffiti photographs in his gallery, which Karp agreed to do. Slowly but surely graffiti art began to receive the recognition which it deserved.

In 1980 two key things happened that would have a lasting effect on graffiti art. The first occurred in June of 1980 with the Times Square Show. It was the first time new aspiring artists would come in contact with and display their art work with graffiti artists. One of the most notable contacts was that between Keith Haring and Fred Brathwaite (Brathwaite began to be known as 'Fab Five Freddy'. Our students might recognize this name as the name of the person who hosts 'Yo! MTV Raps!'). It was after this show that Keith Haring began to produce the graffiti art for which he became famous. Haring would be walking along through the subways and would just stop and begin drawing with white chalk on the black tar paper used to cover unrenewed poster ads in the subway corridors. It wasn't unusual for Haring's work to go untouched in the subway system because his work was so admired.

The other major event which was to occur in 1980 happened in December. Richard Goldstein, author of the first pro-graffiti story in a New York magazine in 1973, wrote an extensive article in the Village Voice on new graffiti writers. This article was important for two reasons. First, Goldstein countered the myth that graffiti writers were an antisocial element. Goldstein felt that some of the graffiti artists who wrote on subway walls and tenement halls were bright individuals who were just expressing themselves in the environment in which they lived. Second and most important, Goldstein in this article was the first to link graffiti and rap music together. His assumption that graffiti and rap music originated from the same cultural conditions was a valid assumption. In fact, some prominent graffiti writers went on to record rap records and play an influential role in the development of the rap music industry, for example PHASE 2, FUTURA, and Fab Five Freddy (Brathwaite).

It was stated earlier in my unit that the 'Hip Hop' subculture and rap music seemed to have originated in the United States in the Bronx. Before discussing rap music in the United States one must examine Jamaican music because it

had a tremendous effect on American rap music. One style of Jamaican music that needs to be explored was known as ‘toasting’.

Dick Hebdige in his book, “Cut ‘N’ Mix” described Jamaican ‘toasting’ as when the Jamaican disc jockies talked over the music they played. This style developed at dances in Jamaica known as “blues dances”. “Blues dances” were dances which took place in large halls or out in the open in the slum yards. “Blues dances” were a regular feature of ghetto life in Jamaica. At these dances black America R&B records were played. Jamaicans were introduced to these records by black American sailors stationed on the island and by American radio stations in and around Miami which played R&B records. Some favorite R&B artists were Fats Domino, Amos Melburn, Louis Jordan, and Roy Brown. There was a great demand for the R&B type of music, but unfortunately there were no local Jamaican bands which could play this type of music as well as the black American artists. As a result, ‘sound systems’ (comprised of DJs, roadies, engineers, bouncers) which were large mobile discotheques were set up to meet this need.

The record playing systems of ‘sound systems’ had to be large so people could hear the bass by which to dance according to Hebdige. The major player in the ‘sound systems’ was the DJ. Some notable Jamaican DJs were Duke Reid, Sir Coxsone, and Prince Buster. They were performers as well as DJs. For example, Duke Reid dressed in a long ermine cloak with a pair of Colt 45s in cowboy holsters with a cartridge belt strapped across his chest and a loaded shotgun over his shoulder. This outfit was topped off with a gilt crown on his head. Just as there were to be DJ battles (competition) in the Bronx, they would occur first in Jamaica with one DJ trying to out play another DJ. As in both ‘battles’, here in the U.S. and Jamaica, the competition boiled down to who had the loudest system and the most original records and technique. It was not uncommon for things to get out of hand and for fighting to erupt during these DJ battles at the Jamaican “blues dances” once the crowds got caught up in this frenzy. It was said that Duke Reid would bring the crowd under control by firing his shotgun in the air.

At first Jamaican toasting began when DJs would ‘toast’ over the music they played with simple slogans to encourage the dancers. Some of these simple slogans were “Work it, Work it” and “Move it up”. As ‘toasting’ became more popular so did the lengths of the toasts. One of the first big “toasting” stars was a Jamaican named U Roy (his real name was Ewart Beckford). Another technique which developed along side ‘toasting’ was called ‘dubs’. ‘Dubbing’ was when the record engineers would cut back and forth between the vocal and instrumental tracks while adjusting the bass and the treble. This technique highlighted the Jamaican ‘toasting’ even more.

There are four areas which Jamaican ‘toasting’ and American rap music have in common. First, both types of music relied on pre-recorded sounds. Second, both types of music relied on a strong beat by which they either rapped or toasted. American rap music relied on the strong beat of hard funk and Jamaican “toasting” relied on the beat from the Jamaican rhythms. Third, in both styles the rapper or toaster spoke their lines in time with the rhythm taken from the records. Fourth, the content of the raps and toasts were similar in nature. For example, as there were boast raps, insult raps, news raps, message raps, nonsense raps, and party raps there also existed toasts that were similar in nature. At this point in my unit I will introduce my students to some music of some notable Jamaican toasters such as U Roy, Duke Reid, Sir Coxsone, and Prince Buster. In addition, I will ask my students to bring in some rap records which illustrate the different types of raps mentioned above.

Steven Hager in his book states that in 1967 a young Jamaican would immigrate to the Bronx bringing with him his knowledge of the Jamaican ‘sound system’ scene and Jamaican ‘toasting’ style. His name was Clive Campbell. He was known as Kool Herc in the Bronx. Campbell received the nickname Hercules while he was attending Alfred E. Smith High School in 1970 by a friend. His friend called him Hercules because of his physique. Clive was into weight lifting. Clive did not like the name Hercules so he shortened it to Herc. When Herc became a graffiti writer he took the tag name Kool Herc. Kool Herc began to DJ in 1973 once he had amassed a great sound system. The Jamaican influence of having a large sound system was not lost on Herc. Herc realized that in order for large crowds

to dance to his music they needed to hear the beat. Kool Herc seldom played an entire song. He knew which part of the record sent his audience into a frenzy. It was usually a 30 second “break” section in which the drums, bass, and rhythm guitar stripped the beat to its barest essence. Herc would buy two copies of the same record and play it over and over emphasizing the break section. Herc used two turntables to accomplish this feat. This technique became known as “beats” or “break-beats”. As in graffiti, style was important and to be imitated if it was good. What was odd about Herc’s style was that he did not use headphones to locate the breaks on the other turntable as other DJs would do who would later use his style. As with the onset of Jamaican ‘toasting’, Kool Herc also used simple phrases to encourage his dancers. But as the mixing in the “breaks” between the two turntables required more concentration, Herc became the first DJ to create MC-Dance team. (While Kool Herc performed at a club named the Hevalo, dancers to his music became known as ‘break dancers’)

There are several other DJs that made contributions to American rap music that need to be noted of whom my students may not be aware. Most students if you ask them are aware of a technique called ‘scratching’, but are unaware of who started it. The technique called ‘scratching’ was invented by a DJ called Theodor. ‘Scratching’ involves the DJ spinning a record backwards and forward very fast while the needle is in the groove. A record when it is handled in this way can become a percussive instrument. With the advent of the CD, this technique may become obsolete. Another important Bronx DJ was George Saddyler who was known as Grandmaster Flash. Grandmaster Flash was an expert at ‘punch phasing’. ‘Punch phasing’ is when a DJ hits a particular break on one turntable while the record on the other turntable is still playing (and it does not necessarily have to be the same record as in the case of Herc’s “break-beat” style). ‘Punch phasing’ is used to accentuate the beat and rhythm for the dancing crowd. Flash also used a beat box. This was a machine that produced an electronic beat. As time went on some rap groups had members who were known as ‘human beat boxes’ who produced sounds using their mouth, lips, and throats. This technique has faded in use. One group that was famous for the ‘human beat box’ sound was known as the Fat Boys.

There is one other early American DJ that deserves mentioning and that is Afrika Bambaataa. Bam ran a sound system at the Bronx River Community Center. As Bob Marley was a spokesperson for reggae, Bam was an ambassador and spokesperson for the ‘Hip Hop’ culture. Afrika Bambaataa was the name of a famous 19th century Zulu chief, the name means Affectionate Leader. Bam took his role as a leader in the ‘Hip Hop’ culture seriously. In 1975 Bam founded an organization known as the Zulu Nation. The major function of this organization was to replace gang rumbles and drugs with rap, dance, and the ‘Hip Hop’ style. There is a chapter of the Zulu Nation in New Haven. At this point in my unit I will see if it is possible to get a representative from this chapter to visit my classroom.

At this point in my unit I would like to break away from talking about rap music and talk about ‘break dancing’ which evolved around rap. ‘Break dancing’ was a style of dancing that grew up around rap music during rap’s early stages of development in the United States. ‘Break dancing’ stretched the human body to its limit. It was a very dangerous form of dancing which I am glad to say has faded in its popularity due to the number of injuries incurred. Very few, if any students ‘break dance’ today. Once I describe some of the common ‘break dance’ moves it will be quite evident why this type of dancing declined.

One popular move in ‘break dancing’ was known as the ‘Floor Lock’. In this move dancers would support themselves on one hand while spinning their bodies around while kicking out their legs. Another popular move was the ‘Handglide or Flow’. In this particular move the dancers would spin their bodies while balancing them on one elbow. The ‘Backspin’ and the ‘Windmill’ moves were break moves that used the shoulder as a pivot. The ‘Headspin’ move as its name indicates, required the dancer to spin using his head as the pivot point. Then there was the ‘lofting’ move in which the dancers would dive in the air and land on their hands. Probably one of the most dangerous break moves was the ‘Suicide’ move. In this move the dancer falls forward with their hands to the side doing a complete flip landing flat on their back. If the dancer survived this move they would freeze into a posture

indicating the completion of their routine. As with other aspects of the 'Hip Hop' subculture, originality and style were of the utmost importance in 'break dancing'. It seemed that the more original the moves were in 'break dancing' the more hazardous they were to the dancer's health.

According to Dick Hebdige in his book, "Cut 'N' Mix," 'break dancing' would be replaced in the 'Hip Hop' culture by dance moves known as the 'electric boogie' moves. Most of these moves would call for dancers to snap and twitch muscles in time to the music. Some of the most popular moves of this style of dance were the Tick, the Mannequin or Robot, the King Tut, the Wave, the Pop, the Float, and the Moonwalk which was made famous by the great Michael Jackson. In fact, many of Michael's dance moves were this style of dancing. Our students may still be familiar with some of these 'electric boogie' moves and with a little encouragement they might be willing to demonstrate some of them. Michael in his recent famous interview with Oprah Winfrey gave credit to the Moonwalk and several of his moves to dancers he observed in clubs and on the streets. These moves had originated from dancers into the 'Hip Hop' culture.

The 'electric boogie' moves according to Hebdige were replaced in 1982 by a type of dancing known as 'free style' in which dancers would improvise their own moves. As I was researching my unit I asked several middle and high school students what new dance was popular now and their response was 'free style'. They said, "Mr. Rhodes, we just do whatever we feel like doing." This may be the case, but if one observes a middle school or high school dance one can not but help to notice that some of the dance moves seem very similar in nature. I believe that this can be explained by the fact that even though style and originality have always been important factors in the 'Hip Hop' culture so has imitation.

When one examines the dress of the 'Hip Hop' culture it is quite evident that one major factor affecting the dress of this subculture has been their dances. Whether the dancer was doing 'break' moves, 'electric boogie' moves, or 'free style' moves loose fitting clothing was a prerequisite in order to do these moves. Also, comfortable shoes would be needed, and sneakers seem to have filled this need. One only needs to look at what are students love to wear to see the validity in the statements concerning dress made above. A question may arise about why young male students wear their pants hanging down by their hips. This style did not result from the dance styles of the 'Hip Hop' culture but from a more dubious source, one that many of these young male students are completely unaware of. This style originated in the prisons. Unfortunately, there is a high percentage of young minorities that are incarcerated at some point in their life. Once behind these locked doors prison officials usually remove inmates' belts for obvious reasons. As a consequence, inmates would walk around with their pants around their hips. Once these young inmates were released and returned to their old neighborhoods, they brought with them this style of wearing their pants around their hips. This style became popular with young males without their realizing they were emulating a style that had originated in prison. I by no means am implying that if these young males had known the origin of this style that this style would not have become so popular. If one talks to any one who has been incarcerated they will substantiate the fact that this style has been in prisons for many years.

At this point in my unit I would like to examine the rap music industry today. Even though rap is proportionally more popular among blacks, its primary audience is white and lives in the suburbs according to David Samuels in his article in the November 11, 1991 issue of "The New Republic." The article was titled "The Rap on Rap: the 'Black Music' that Isn't Either". Samuels attempts to substantiate this fact by revealing that the number one selling record in 1991 according to Billboard Magazine was Niggaz4life, a celebration of gang rape and other violence by the group N.W.A. (Niggers With Attitude). Billboard Magazine in the summer of 1991 started to use 'Soundscan', a much more accurate method of counting record sells by scanning the bar codes of records sold at the cash register instead of relying on big-city record stores to determine the most popular record. Samuels went on to state that the more rappers were packaged as violent black criminals the bigger the white audience became. I do not think any one can account for the popularity of rap to a white audience no more than one could account for the popularity of the black entertainment in the 'speakeasies' to the white audiences of the late 1920s and 1930s. Other than the attraction which exists for something that is taboo or forbidden by one's social group.

The first rap record to make it big was “Rapper’s Delight” released by the Sugar Hill Gang on Sylvia and Joey Robinson’s Sugar Hill label. Mr. David in his article said that “Rapper’s Delight” (a nonsense rap), “White Lines” (a rap with an anti-drug theme), and “The Message” (about ghetto life in the black neighborhood) were designed to sell records to whites and had a less favorable reaction in the streets where rap was created according to Russell Simmons, president of Def Jam Records. Simmons recalls an incident when Junebug, a famous DJ of the time, was playing “The Message” and Ronnie DJ put a pistol to his head and said, Take that record off and break it or I’ll blow your f—g head off. The whole club stopped until he broke the record and put it in the garbage. This attitude may have been true for certain rappers but I have my doubts if this attitude was a true reflection of how a majority of African-Americans felt who liked rap music. I base my assumption on the fact that when I used to frequent clubs, two of the most requested records were “Rapper’s Delight” and “The Message”. (These clubs were predominately attended by blacks.)

Run-D.M.C. was the first black rap group to break through to a mass white audience with their albums, Run-D.M.C and King of Rock. These albums led the way that rap would travel into the musical mainstream. Even though Run-D.M.C. dressed as if they came right off the street corner, this was not the case. Run and D.M.C came from middle class families, they were never deprived of anything and they never ran with a gang. One could never tell this by their dress or from the raps they made. Run-D.M.C. records were produced under the Def Jam label which had as one of its founders a Jewish punk rocker named Rick Rubin. Russell Simmons, Run’s brother, was to later take control of the Def Jam label in 1989, however this can not take away from the fact that this so-called militant rap group was at one time being produced by a white person. What is even more startling is that one of the most militant rap groups, Public Enemy, was also produced by Rick Rubin. Just as Run-D.M.C. came from middle-class families so did Public Enemy. Members of Public Enemy grew up in suburban Long Island towns with successful middle-class professional parents.

One can not deny that whites were starting to have an effect on the rap music that had originally begun in the black neighborhood. But this is to be expected any time an art form starts to gain popularity with mainstream white America. The same thing can happen with an art form that is popular with mainstream white America that all of a sudden becomes popular in a minority community. Students need to be aware of this fact and come to grips with this. Samuel David seems to be implying that with the influence of whites on the rap music scene that it is only a matter of time before rap starts to lose its popularity in the black community and that rap is on its way out. I strongly disagree with Mr. David on this point. I believe that rap music can withstand the influence of other (ethnic/social) groups and still remain popular and flourish. My following discussion of the role women are playing in the rap industry seems to substantiate my point of view.

Before concluding my unit, the role women are playing in the rap industry must be discussed. As rap music evolved and became popular, women tended to be the targets of male rap lyrics and generally were not portrayed in a favorable light. Rap music producers also seemed to be hesitant to produce female rap artists. David Thigpin in his article, “Not for Men Only; Women Rappers are Breaking the Mold with a Message of their Own”, offers two reasons for this reluctance. One being, rap producers were apprehensive about signing female rappers because they feared tampering with their proven formula of success of producing macho male rappers. The other being, rap producers did not feel that female voices could supply the requisite loudness and abrasiveness that they felt was a major feature of rap music.

Nothing can bring about change quicker than a financial success, especially in the music industry whose main motivating factor seems to be profit. A New York City female rap trio by the name of Salt ‘N’ Pepa would provide the rap music industry with the incentive to produce more female rappers with the success of its debut album, Hot, Cool, & Vicious, which sold over a million copies. Besides the fact that people like what they heard, Russell Simmons who was quoted in Thigpen’s article offers another explanation. Simmons stated, “There are more women buying rap records who would like to relate to women artists and there are more guys who want to hear a women’s point of view.”

With advent of female rappers also came new rap messages which transcended the boasting that was so common with male rappers. For example, Salt 'N' Pepper rapped over soul-tinged R&B melodies with teasing, street-savvy raps about maturity, independence from men, and sexual responsibility. Another female rapper, Monie Love, tried not to be too serious with her rap messages. While Queen Latifah raps were about women being optimistic and having pride in themselves and tended to counter male rappers' lyrics which tended to express a poor opinion of women. However, there are some female rappers like BWP (Bytches with Problems) who voice a vengeful brand of radical black feminism. BWP's raps dealt with such issues as date rape, male egos, and police brutality. BWP showed that they could be just as boastful as male rappers with their lyrics on the record 'In We Want Money' when they stated, "Marry you? Don't make me laugh! Don't you know, all I want is half!" Another female rapper who deserves mentioning because of her forceful attack on misogyny is Yo-Yo with her record 'You Can't Play with My Yo-Yo'. David Thigpen concluded his article on female rappers by stating that female rappers beside offering a different attitude, have shown that rap can be far more significant and flexible than its critics have admitted. This also illustrates, contrary to what David Samuels holds to be true, that rap music can endure the influence of groups other than its creators and still survive and flourish.

As already stated, rap music began in poor black neighborhood in New York City, the Bronx. It quickly spread from one major urban center to another where there was a large population of black people. Music on early rap records sounded like the black music of the day, which was heavy funk or more than often disco music. The basic function of rap music was to serve as dance music as did the Jamaican 'toasting' music from which it originated. One major criticism that the older generation has had about rap music centers on how it is very difficult to understand what the rapper is saying. David Samuels quotes Bill Stephney's (Stephney who is considered by many to be the smartest man in the rap business) reaction to first hearing rap music to address this point on how difficult it is to understand young rappers. Stephney said, "the point wasn't rapping, it was rhythm, DJs cutting records left and right. It was the rappers role to match the intensity of the music rhythmically. No one knew what he was saying. He was just rocking the mike." This serves to illustrate that one of the major attractions of rap music is the rhythm or the beat. I asked a middle school student while I was researching my unit if he always understood all the words in a rap record. He responded no. The student said that the beat of the record determines whether he likes the record or not. Maybe this can help explain why some rap records whose lyrics are racist or so violent in nature can be so popular. I intend on testing this theory in my class at this point in my unit by discussing some controversial rap artists and their records with my students. Two groups which come to mind are Public Enemy and N.W.A.

I have several recommendations concerning the teaching techniques which can be used to present the material found in my unit. Based on my teaching experience in the middle and high schools, I have learned that if you lecture to students for an entire period you will lose the attention of a majority of your students by the end of the period. Thus, lecturing should be limited to no more than 15 minutes and should be used to introduce some of the major aspects or objectives of my unit. (i.e. Jamaican music, 'Hip Hop' culture, graffiti, etc. . . .) Afterwhich, a discussion can occur on one of these particular aspects. Another alternative is to present students with excerpts from some of the material listed in the resource section of my unit. These excerpts can either be accompanied with a set of teacher-developed questions or related activities which will help emphasize some of the more important aspects of a particular objective, or students can be asked to develop their own questions from these excerpts. Also, rap records can be used as focal points for classroom discussions.

In addition, I intend on having my students do reports on individuals outlined in my unit who played influential roles in Jamaican and American rap music. Students will also be asked to do reports on the major aspects of the 'Hip Hop' culture. Finally, I would suggest that the films in the resource section of my unit be shown in order to highlight and discuss certain aspects of the 'Hip Hop' culture.

I have come to the conclusion that there can be no conclusion to my unit on the evolution of rap music in the United

States because rap music is still in a state of evolution. There are areas that I have not even attempted to explore that rap music has begun to influence. For example, gospel music is one musical area in which they are beginning to produce their own rappers. Which leaves me to wonder how long it will be before other types of music in the United States such as country music embraces rap. In addition, I do not think that rap music can affect these other types of American music without somehow being itself affected by these different types of American music. There are two points I would like to make before I conclude my unit. One, I find it very ironic that even though rap music is a billion dollar a year business that both black and white local radio stations are still reluctant to play it for fear of losing advertisers. These stations fail to take into account that rap music when it began was basically distributed through cassette recordings and has now grown to such a point that there are record companies that cater almost exclusively to rap music. Yet, when national advertisers wish to reach the 18-24 year old age group they will employ a rap artist. Second, in my opinion rap music is truly an American minority creation which deserves more credit and recognition as an art form rather than as a fad which should just fade away with time. Hopefully, my students will come to this same conclusion.



Lesson Plan #1

Pre-lesson activity:

Students will canvass a neighborhood looking for graffiti tag names or murals. Students should do this in small groups due to the fact that some neighborhoods that our students live in can be quite dangerous.

**This lesson will occur after we have covered the section in my unit dealing with the graffiti aspect of the 'Hip Hop' culture.

Objective:

Students will create either a graffiti tag name or a graffiti mural on piece of construction paper.

Materials:

Construction paper, magic markers

Procedure:

After canvassing the neighborhood looking at graffiti tag names and murals, the class will discuss what they have observed. After which, each student will create their own graffiti tag name. Then students will have an opportunity to explain their tag name to the class. Then students will be shown graffiti murals of some renowned graffiti artists such as Lee Quinones and Keith Haring.

Homework:

Students will be asked to create a graffiti mural of their own and be prepared to explain it to the class the next day.



Lesson Plan #2

Objective:

Students will create their own purpose rap.

Materials:

Each student will be asked to bring in a rap record.

Procedure:

First we will discuss the different types of raps which exist (i.e. boast raps, insult raps, news raps, message raps, nonsense raps, and party raps.) Students will then be asked to provide examples of these types of raps from rappers that they know. Then we will play several rap records that have been brought in by the students. We will then classify these rap records into one of the categories we have discussed. After which students will be asked to create a rap with a purpose of their choosing.

Homework:

Students will take home their raps and create a graffiti drawing to go along with their rap.



Lesson Plan #3

Objective:

Students will write their impressions of some art work done by the graffiti artist of their choice.

Material:

Art books containing the work of graffiti artist such as Lee Quionones and Keith Haring, construction paper, magic markers, crayons.

Procedure:

I will bring in several art books containing the art work of several well known graffiti artists that were discussed in my unit and several artists that were not discussed in my unit. Students will choose two works of one particular artist and then recreate these drawings and write their impressions of these works of art.



Teacher/Student Bibliography

Books

Hagar, Steven, "Hip Hop; The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti," New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.

This book is an excellent source on the history of rap music that can be used by both teachers and students. It one of the few books that have been written on this subject.

Hebdige, Dick, "Cut 'N' Mix; Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music," New York: Methuen & Co., 1987.

This book gives an excellent history on Caribbean and Jamaican music. This book also has an excellent chapter on the history of rap and hip hop.

Toop, David, "The Rap Attack; African Jive to New York Hip Hop;" Boston: South End Press, 1984.

Good source for the history of the early years of rap and the influence African music had on rap.

Magazine Articles/Newspaper Articles

Cooks, Jay and Koepp, Stephen, "Time": "Chilling Out on Rap Flash;New city music brings out the last word in wild style", March 21, 1983, U.S. Edition.

Good source for explaining some hip hop terminology and dress.

Hager, Steven, "Village Voice:" "Afrika Bambaataa's Hip Hop", September 21,1982.

Good source on one of Hip Hop's leading spokesmen.

Samuels, David, "The New Republic": "The Rap on Rap: the Black Music that Isn't Either", November 11, 1991.

Excellent source on the history of rap music. Must be edited before student use.

Simpson, Janice C., "Time": "Yo! Rap Gets on the Map; Led by groups like Public Enemy", February 5, 1990.

Good source for information on rap groups such as Run-D.M.C. and Public Enemy.

Thigpen, David, "Time": "Not for Men; Women Rappers are Breaking the Mold with a Message of their Own", May 27, 1991.

Good source on female rappers.



Films

"Wild Style" and "Beat Street" are two films which portray the Hip Hop culture.



Rap Records

Sugar Hill Gang, "Rapper's Delight", Sugar Hill Label, 1979.

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, "The Message", Sugar Hill Label, 1982.

Lightin' Rod, "Hustler's Convention", United Artists, 1973.

The Incredible Bongo Band, "Apache", Pride Records, date unknown.

Tom Tom Club, "Genius of Love", Sire, 1982

Herbie Hancock, "Rockit", CBS, 1983



[Contents of 1993 Volume IV](#) | [Directory of Volumes](#) | [Index](#) | [Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute](#)

© 2002 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
[Terms of Use](#) [Contact YNHTI](#)