

# How the beastie boys took rap music from the niche and launched it into mainstrea...

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The Beastie Boys played a very important role in the evolution of rock, and, especially, hip hop/rap music. Not only did their music further the genre, but their entire image did a great deal to push the rap genre into the mainstream. While there had been other charting rap records before, namely ones like “ Rapper’s Delight” and “ The Message,” and even platinum-selling albums by Run-DMC, The Beastie Boys’ Licensed to Ill became the best-selling rap album of the decade, and served to expand the genre’s fanbase tremendously. There are a number of important musical and sociocultural reasons why The Beastie Boys were the right group to catalyze this expansion, and why the hit song “ No Sleep Till Brooklyn,” and its accompanying music video, was a perfect showcase of these factors. The Beasties’ ethnicity, their musical style, their aesthetic, and this very song in particular, are all vital material to be investigated in identifying how the group broadened the appeal of a still-relatively-niche genre.

A theme which has been relevant since before the jazz age, and will almost certainly continue to be relevant in at least the near future, is that of white musicians essentially “ domesticating” black musical styles in order to widen their consumer appeal. A discussion of Run-DMC vs The Beastie Boys could play over almost identically to one of King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band vs The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, with only some names and dates changed. Due to an intoxicating number of social, cultural, racial, and historical factors which would likely require entire books to effectively deconstruct, many genres of music emerge from within small, deep pockets of the African-American community. While these may gain a certain degree of traction within focused, local scenes, their appeal is still largely limited to those from

within the community, and those few who are adventurous enough to insert themselves into it. It would be unrealistic to say that race is the only reason for this effect, but, time and time again, it has been shown that once a white artist can scoop up the sensibilities of a black genre and tie it up in a polished, unthreatening bow, its commercial potential can be fully realized. Needless to say, The Beastie Boys themselves are all white (who would have thought someone with the surname Horowitz could be a rap star?), but it's important to note that in the music video for "No Sleep Till Brooklyn," virtually all the attendees of the concert are white as well. I would prefer to think that people would not be herded by something as simple and shallow as this, but clearly, they are, or at least can be. Showing a white group among screaming white fans definitely goes to deconstruct the supposed racial wall surrounding rap music.

Refreshingly, it was not only The Beastie Boys' race that helped them expand the hip-hop fanbase, but their actual music as well. The concept of music controlling the evolution of music is certainly a more preferable narrative than the sheer color of people's skin, but it's also important not to cover up the real history or racial tension. Anyway, The Beastie Boys took Run-DMC's rock-influenced style even further, especially on "No Sleep Till Brooklyn," with its heavy guitar solo and riffs, courtesy of Slayer's Kerry King. Adding rock to the rap formula evidently acted as something like sugar to medicine, making it a more appealing and more palatable offering to mainstream consumers, to whom rock music had already had over three decades to work itself into. However, the race discussion really isn't over yet,

because it could certainly be argued that the reason rock music acted as an effective tour guide into the rap world was because rock had, by this period, become largely a white genre, especially after the era of AOR. This could explain, then, why Run-DMC was able to be very successful as well, “ despite” being black. I don’t know that there’s a real answer to whether this speculation is just pessimism about race relations, or in fact a realistic view, but regardless, it’s an angle that should be considered. Music still truly is about more than just race, though (thankfully), and the exclusively musical side of The Beastie Boys’ popularity should not be undervalued, or taken with too much more than a grain of salt.

For better or for worse, aesthetic and image are just about as important in popular music as the actual music is. Whereas earlier rap, like “ The Message,” and then later rap, like “ Dear Mama,” would have dark themes, deep lyrics, and heavy-hitting imagery and social commentary, the mid-80s to early-90s represented something of a reprieve from seriousness in at least mainstream rap. It was a time when rap was fun, and The Beastie Boys were at the forefront. Most people know that “ Fight for Your Right” was very tongue-in-cheek, but regardless, it represented a new image for hip hop music: one of fun, frat parties, and a very adolescent view of life. It would be very reasonable for people to take issue with this (really, most) era(s) of rap’s shameless misogyny, but aside from that, the music generally represented good times and upbeat temperament. The Beastie Boys still had an edge to them though, something to prevent them from falling into a dreaded image of rule-abiding tameness. The Beasties were no Osmonds,

and were able to still carry with them some of the “ dangerous” appeal of rap. In a word, they had the best of both worlds: the edgy appeal of rap, with the safety of white party music. Serving perhaps both of these camps, as well, was the group’s history as a punk act. Punk may have been somewhat frightening in the mid-late 70s, but after around a decade of existence, its shock had worn off somewhat. However, punk can never be entirely neutered of its anti-establishment image (try as the likes of Fall Out Boy and Panic! At the Disco might), and its sensibilities could still be seen in The Beastie Boys. So it’s essentially another case of the best of both, as they were able to reap the benefits of both punk’s familiarity and its residual social disquietude. In sheer personality, as well, The Beastie Boys and their music had a certain silliness about it, which added to the image of fun. Though obviously coming before, they remind me of Blink-182 in this regard, and I can attest to the appeal of such an image from experience, as my brother and I appreciated Blink’s immaturity when we were younger.

“ No Sleep Till Brooklyn” is an effective example of The Beastie Boys in a nutshell, and a prudent one to use in discussion of the group’s expansion of rap’s appeal. The song and its music video both act as bridges to more fans. While the song and video, being a product of The Beastie Boys, exhibit the characteristics already discusses at large, there are certain particular aspects of if/them specifically that are relevant. Firstly, it’s important to note that the entire song is basically a playful jab at glam/hair metal and the hard rock scene (the title itself being a reference to Motörhead’s No Sleep ‘ til Hammersmith). The beginning of the video shows the Beasties showing up to

a gig as themselves, only to be denied by the venue's booking agent. When they come back to the door with ridiculous Spinal-Tap-esque wigs, though, they're welcomed with open arms. When they take the stage and the crowd goes wild as they play their rap music, it is suggested that fans of rock/metal music can and should enjoy rap as well (this video is very similar to Run-DMC & Aerosmith's "Walk This Way" in this regard). Yes, again, the song is poking fun at rock culture and the raucous life of a band on the road, but it is done so in a fun and open way, not as an angry criticism or dis track. Simply connecting the two communities at all serves to push them closer together, and encourages an exchange between them. The Beastie Boys are shown smashing their instruments, poking fun at the likes of The Who, and then they go humorously over the top by firing a Tommy gun on stage. It's my opinion that this song and video serve to say something along the lines of "Sure, rap is a bit odd, but so is rock!" When the venue's staff storm the stage and try to fight with the band, the crowd still cheers on, which seems to suggest that any kind of "war" between the rock and rap camps is unfounded, and that the fans shouldn't feel the need to pick sides.

The Beastie Boys may have been the first successful white rap act, and that is an important fact, but it should not be forgotten that their significance does also expand beyond race relations. Their musical style and accessible but still-edgy party image did a great deal to expand the popularity of rap music. Even if some rap purists don't like The Beastie Boys themselves, they ought still to respect them for what they did for the genre. Without the group's domestication of the genre and its ability to open it up to huge

commercial success, it likely would not have reached nearly as large an audience as it now has, and would not have been able to inspire rappers that such purists do appreciate. I can speak for at least myself in saying that The Beasties helped introduce me to rap, and while I still only enjoy very little of what the genre has to offer, I can appreciate how many other people could have been turned on to an entire world of music they would otherwise have been too intimidated, or possibly even ignorant, to discover.