

# The evolution of an art form

Business



Rap music has transformed from the sounds of oppressed people to the music of an open-minded generation of free-thinkers. Rap originated with the oral tradition of African folk tales, then evolved into African slave field chants and eventually to the billion-dollar industry and art form appreciated by today's youth.

Due to great advancements in technology, the art form has made some of its biggest changes over the last 30 to 40 years. The themes of expensive clothing, flashy cars and respect from peers are all relatively new concepts of a relatively old craft. Historians credit early 16th century poetry for kick-starting rap music. Current day rap or hip-hop music contains rhymes and metaphors that are considered poetry. However, the rhythmic tunes actually originated thousands of years ago in the form of African storytelling.

This is why rap has always been associated with the African-American culture. The African storyteller would tell tales as others tapped out beats on drums or played notes on wind instruments in the background. That storytelling technique is essentially the most basic form of rap and the music the most basic for of DJ'ing. In the 18th and 19th centuries, these stories turned into chants that African slaves would sing as they worked in the fields. Like the old chants, the dominant voice of modern day rap is first person singular. (Bradley, DuBois 31) The majority of popular rap (like the old slave chants) tell a personal story.

Also similar to the slave tunes, hip-hop culture has created new words and given new meaning to old words. Words such as "fresh," "wack" and "dope" have become so ubiquitous in the hip-hop world, that they are now

considered mainstream vocabulary. Rap artists are especially known for creative pronunciation and even warping words to make them fit the meter. The rapper Snoop Dogg is known for being one of the craftiest artists of his time. As The New York Times Magazine writer Kathleen E.

Miller wrote, “ Snoop Dogg has invented his own ‘ slanguage,’ which is based on his use of izzle as a suffix for existing words, sometimes substituting all but the first letter of a word.” Rhythm, timing and changing of words are all themes of this type of expression that has been carried on for thousands of years. According to The Anthology of Rap, “ Rap grew out of African American oral expression and took shape in the pressure cooker of the South Bronx in the 1970s.” Another aspect of rap that sprouted from African roots is the practice of call and response. In the fields, the leader of the chant might call out a phrase and the followers would all respond in unison. The call-and-response practice became an essential element of African-American worship and continues to be a common practice in some modern-day churches with predominantly African-American membership.

Many decades later, MCs would holler at the audience with a phrase, and the crowd would invariably respond with the same phrase. The men credited with resurrection of the call and response were DJ Hollywood and DJ Kool Herc in the 1970s. “ DJ Hollywood’s and DJ Kool Herc’s influences were extensive because of the rhymes they developed to supplement their sets.” (Bradley, Dubois 52) Other early pioneer rap artists include: Afrkia Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and Kurtis Blow. Afrika Bambaataa, a member of the Black Spade gang, grew up in the South Bronx borough of

New York. Through his music, he inspired peace among his rival gang members.

Bambaataa began teaching young DJs the craft as well. Many of those DJs went on to form “ crews” like Soul Sonic Force and Cosmic Force.

Grandmaster Flash was a one of the first DJs to strictly play the music- or, as it is known, “ spinning.” He did no rapping of his own, as he felt that he was, in his own words, “ totally wack on the mic” by which he meant that he lacked the vocal skills some of his constituents possessed. The Grandmaster teamed up with rapper Melle Mel to create, what some consider to be the most progressive rap group of their time: Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

Kurtis Blow was a new kind of rapper; his rhymes were clean and straightforward, but his music was not what made him an icon. Blow was adaptable, personable, and good-looking, Blow had crossover appeal before rap really knew what crossover appeal was. (Bradley DuBois 24) Blow was one of the first artists to make a career, not out of the music, but out of the industry. He wore polished shoes and flashy clothing. Some say he paved the way for the extravagant style that is now associated with the hip-hop culture. Many popular rappers come from underprivileged families.

To combat the poverty, a common theme of that rappers use is not only hyping themselves up, but also putting down their opponent. Rapper Childish Gambino says, “ When I want to be a superhero I just wake up.” Meaning that Gambino, unlike his competition, doesn’t need a movie to be considered a superhero/role model. In his book Decoded, Jay-Z writes “ Keeping your

opponent down is part of the hip-hop culture. It's built on direct confrontation.

" He also writes that in rap, more so than any other form of artistic expression, respect is a man's most valuable asset. In an art form where the majority of lyrics pertain to money, clothes and cars, the goal most often sought is not even a tangible item. One way of obtaining such respect is by representing a community or neighborhood. In the song, " Empire State of Mind," Jay-Z raps " I'm out of Brooklyn now I'm down in Tribeca right next to De Niro, but I'll be hood forever. I'm the new Sinatra and since I made it here I can make it anywhere.

Yeah they love me everywhere." Here, Jay-Z explains that, even though he's become one of the richest men in the music industry, he still remembers his roots and thus, retains respect from all members of his audience. When he references Sinatra, he demonstrates irony as Sinatra's work is generally associated with an older, wealthier crowd compared to Jay-Z's standard fans of young, disadvantaged, African-American. Another way to earn the respect is the aforementioned sabotaging of one's opponent. However, some artists have taken the approach that their greatest adversary is themselves; Chiddy Bang said " Where's Lois? Me I'm superman.

I'm just here to save the day. Or at least I thought I was. Till I flew into save her and I met my opponent I'm fighting with myself don't offer your condolence." In saying this, Chiddy Bang states that he is confronted with personal struggles more often than outer struggles and thus, has a unique message to portray. Since the early days of African civilization, when tales

were shared through oral tradition, though today's high-tech digital productions, this unique communication form has relied upon rhythm and feel. The changes in the craft could only have been expected for, as with any sort of art form, rap had to develop in some manner.

Rap can be a powerful form of expression. In a podcast interview with Jesse Thorn of PRI: Young America, rapper Brother Ali discussed his feelings of being white in a predominately black art form. He said that he had to "prove himself to be worthy of rap." As rap becomes more culturally integrated, the music becomes more accessible to a diverse community. As written in *The Anthology of Rap*, "Rap is a form of expression governed by a set of conventions available to all and vivified by the creativity of anyone who learns rap's history and masters the craft." That is to say, as time progresses and society becomes less focused on racial barriers, areas of life that were once segregated can become integrated and thus benefit all humanity; not just a subculture.