

Lyrics in rap music



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In this essay I am going to discuss and take an in-depth look at the topic of the role and importance of the lyrics in rap music, which are often violent, sexually explicit and sexist in content. In order to understand the role these lyrics play in rap music, it is necessary to consider the musical style that goes with them and even the hip-hop culture that gave us rap music. This culture, including rap music, originated in the USA, but its appeal has become international.

In the first introductory section I will analyse the terms rap music and rapper, and I will briefly discuss the origins of rap music. This section will introduce some important artists in the genre, mentioning their backgrounds and especially how they started their careers as rappers. Usually rappers begin singing in the streets, which might be a way of trying to escape from their difficult lives. Nonetheless in their lyrics they describe what could be taken as the real facts of such lives. So one question is: do their lyrics consist of violence, sex and sexism because this is an accurate reflection of the typical experiences of their own lives? What made them sing such songs? In order to be able to answer this question, I will include some simple lyrics as examples of some typical rap songs. Then, in the second part of the essay I will focus on the listeners and how rap music influences them. Overall, my intention is to discover exactly what is the significance of the lyrics in rap music within the context of this musical style as a whole.

Generally the term rap refers to a street poetry, using slang language and phrases to express the singer's feelings and show to the audience their point of view about life. Rap music therefore refers to the musical style in which such poetry is performed, which is very rhythmical usually without much

accompaniment. The people that perform and usually also compose this poetry are rappers. The rappers in their music usually talk about the realities of their lives and their social environments; such realities include racism or the difference between male and female, violent events and feelings, and sexual attraction and activity, in other words everything that they have experienced, lived through and seen for themselves. But why is this? Why do they emphasize such aspects of their lives and not others? This relates to another question: is rap music intended as pure entertainment or is it more a music of social protest?

The reason that I chose to work on this topic is that I find music in general and especially rap music really interesting. I myself play guitar and piano. For performance, I like songs with clear melody that can be easily performed and played on piano and guitar. However, I do not like mainstream pop music, which is mostly written to formulas with cliché lyrics. Rap music is something very different, something I have never tried to perform or to explore, so in this essay I am trying to get to know it better, including its history, and also to share with readers my research.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LYRICS OF RAP MUSIC

Rap music became widely known in the U. S. A. in the nineteen eighties, as a reaction against the disco music of the seventies. It was then and it remains today a predominantly black or African-American style of music, in which the lyrics are very important. This can be seen in the following summary of the history of rap:

Rap evolved from African people in general and black people born in the U. S. in particular. Its origins can be traced to West Africa where tribesmen held “men of words” in high regard. Later when slaves were brought to the New World, the captives mixed American music with the beats they remembered from Africa. Another origin of rap is a form of Jamaican folk stories called “toasts.” These are narrative poems that tell stories in rhyme. Over a hundred years later, rapping was a street art. Just as doo-wop in the 1950’s, rap began in inner-city schoolyards and street corners in the 1970’s. Early raps were boastful tales, and put-downs directed at other rappers. This music style was slowly growing in popularity among black teens in New York City, Washington, D. C., and Philadelphia. As early as 1974 neighborhood block parties in New York featured early forms of rapping. But it wasn’t until the commercial success of “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979 that major record labels took notice of this explosive new sound.

However, although the lyrics are particularly important in rap, many would say that the essence of rap is in its beat. For example, William Eric Perkins says, “the foundation of rap music is the beat. The beat is the structure around which the lyrics are developed, and samples of selected phrases from previously recorded music, jingles, solos, and so on play second fiddle. In rap vernacular, those with the ‘dope’ beats produce the ‘deffest’ raps.”

Of course rap was and still is mainly a young person’s type of music, and both the performers and the audience were and are youthful. Young people are often rebellious in spirit, and music is one of their main ways of expressing their rebelliousness:

Rap music has stamped through America like no other form of music since the creation of rock music in the 1960s. Like other popular styles, it has a history that is closely aligned with the rebellious attitude of its young creators; youth who rejected the contemporary music prevalent during the late 1970s (disco).

However, rap is not only a rebellion against early forms of music and the lifestyles associated with them. Sometimes it is also music of social protest. At least, it is very realistic and the opposite of escapist. Mostly rap music is a means of expression. It is music of the street. In their lyrics rappers express their fears for their community, the reality of their lives, and they describe both the positive and negative sides of everyday life.

Some artists come from environments that are impoverished and unhealthy, so music gives them a way of coping with reality, their violent and hard life. In this way they find a kind of shelter in their songs even though these songs describe their life and how hard it is. Thus they express their feelings through their music.

Rap music differs from the other kinds of music, because of the great emphasis it puts on the words and lyrics. As said above, it is a kind of street poetry. This emphasis on words is because the songs are about real life. The rapper's delivery is more like rhythmical speech than actual singing, although there is also a kind of very simple melody. The lyrics are not simple love songs, but reflect the complexity of reality.

Eminem, the famous white rapper, who has had quite a hard life, is a good example of the way rappers make their actual lives the source of their songs.

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Shortly after he was born, his father abandoned him and until age twelve he and his mother lived in public housing. As a teenager he became interested in rap music, something that caused him to abandon school in the ninth grade and start performing with groups. The lyrics of Eminem have been criticized for being violent and offensive towards other celebrities. For example:

Sometimes I just feel like my father, I hate to be bothered

With all of this nonsense it's constant

And, " Oh, it's his lyrical content –

– the song ' Guilty Conscience' has gotten such rotten responses"

And all of this controversy circles me

And it seems like the media immediately

Points a finger at me (finger at me)..

So I point one back at 'em, but not the index or pinkie

Or the ring or the thumb, it's the one you put up

When you don't give a fuck, when you won't just put up

With the bullshit they pull, cause they full of shit too

When a dude's gettin bullied and shoots up his school

And they blame it on Marilyn (on Marilyn) and the heroin

Where were the parents at? And look where it's at

Middle America, now it's a tragedy

Now it's so sad to see, an upper class ci-ty

Havin this happenin (this happenin)..

Then attack Eminem cause I rap this way (rap this way)..

But I'm glad cause they feed me the fuel that I need for the fire

To burn and it's burnin and I have returned

There is a kind of aggression behind these lyrics which also allows the audience to identify with the anti-establishment attitude. They are also typical in the way they relate many different things together, including events in the news such as high school shootings, drug use, the media, middle America, and so on.

Another famous rapper is a twenty-six year-old, Curtis James Jackson III, known as 50 cent. 50 cent is an American rapper who has lived a hard life. Curtis James Jackson III grew up without a father and was raised by his mother. His mother was only fifteen years old when she gave birth to him. He was born in South Jamaica. His mother who was a drug dealer died at twenty-three years old, leaving an eight year old boy who was raised by his grandparents. In early teenage he was dealing drugs, until he was arrested. He continued selling and hiding drugs, a fact that brought many problems and he was arrested a second time. However when he stopped he devoted

himself to his career as a rap singer. Something that increased his popularity was his collaboration with Eminem.

It is common and quite usual that rappers use violence and sexism in their lyrics. As mentioned above, violence is a means of expression of physical force either against ourselves or others and especially the weaker ones, while sexism is an attitude and belief of a person, usually male, that he is superior to or stronger than others, usually female. Sometimes a sexist attitude is communicated in lyrics that are sexually explicit. It is possible that the rapper did not deliberately intend to be sexist in the defined sense, but this is just part of his assumptions and his intention to be as 'realistic' as possible. For example, the song called « Candy Shop» by 50 cent is all about sexual activity and is apparently addressed to a girl, at least at the beginning, rather than to the audience itself (as in Eminem's song above). However a little later the pronoun " you" is dropped and replaced by " she" as though 50 cent is now ' sharing' his sexual experiences with his audience.

Give it to me baby, nice and slow

Climb on top, ride like you in the rodeo

You ain't never heard a sound like this before

Cause I ain't never put it down like this before

Soon as I come through the door she get to pulling on my zipper

It's like it's a race who can get undressed quicker

Isn't it ironic how erotic it is to watch em in thongs

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Had me thinking 'bout that ass after I'm gone

I touch the right spot at the right time

Lights on or lights off, she like it from behind

So seductive, you should see the way she wind

Her hips in slow-mo on the floor when we grind

As Long as she ain't stopping, homie I ain't stopping

Dripping wet with sweat man its on and popping

All my champagne campaign, bottle after bottle its on

And we gon' sip 'til every bubble in every bottle is gone"

Here we can easily understand the sexual innuendo. Whether it is actually sexist or not is a matter of opinion, probably the singer believes that it is just about the two sexes that want to have ' a bit of fun'.

Niggaz With Attitude (N. W. A), a five member band whose lyrics are openly violent (and refer to guns), are much more politically motivated. They have attacked even the police and FBI. " Moreover the N. W. A has given to rap music its criminal image and raises the whole question of authenticity. This band has captured the essence of young black male rage."

You don't really think you're gonna get away do you?

We haven't spotted them yet

But they're somewhere in the immediate vicinity.

A 100 Miles and Runnin'.

MC Ren I hold the gun and

You want me to kill a mutherfucker and it's done in.

Since I'm stereotyped to kill and destruct

Is one of the main reasons I don't give a fuck.

Chances are usually not good

' Cause I freeze with my hands on a hot hood.

And gettin' jacked by the you-know-who.

When in a black and white the capacity is two.

We're not alone, we're three more brothers, I mean street-brothers.

Now wearin' my dyes, 'cause I'm not stupid, mutherfuckers.

They're out to take our heads for what we said in the past.

Point blank – They can kizz my black azz.

I didn't stutter when I said " Fuck Tha Police".

' Cause it's hard for a nigga to get peace.

Now it's broken and can't be fixed.

' Cause police and little black niggers don't mix so

Now I'm creepin' through the fall.

Runnin' like a team. Well, see, I might have slayed y'all.

So for now pack the gun and

Hold it in the air.

' Cause MC Ren has a 100 Miles of Runnin'...

These lyrics express not only a lot of violence and rebelliousness, but also they use a typical kind of black slang. This is an expression of identity. As the song continues, it brings in the FBI as a way of proudly suggesting that N. W. A. is really important, or dangerous. The lyrics even comment sarcastically on how some of the enemies of black people are “wearin' our T-shirts”!

Runnin' like a nigga I hate to lose.

Show me on the news but I hate to be abused.

I know it was a set-up.

So now I'm gonna get up.

Even if the FBI wants me to shut up.

But I've got 10 000 niggas strong.

They got everybody singin' my “Fuck Tha Police” song.

And while they treat my group like dirt,

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Their whole fuckin' family is wearin' our T-shirts.

So I'mma run til I can't run no more.

' Cause it's time for MC Ren to settle the score.

I got a urge to kick down doors.

(The complete lyrics of this song are included in the Appendix.)

This band is considered as one of the most violent bands in the decade of the eighties. Their lyrics were showing and describing a criminal life and a strong opposition to the police. Even the name of this band is openly aggressive using the ' N-word' (which is taboo for white people) and the word ' attitude' in a sense which means aggressive or rebellious. This allows young black people in the audience to identify strongly with the band, because it seems to represent black people standing up for themselves and asserting their power. Although this is not political in the sense that the Black Power movement was, nonetheless it is openly rebellious, and extremely realistic.

CHAPTER TWO: HOW RAP AFFECTS ITS AUDIENCE

" Hip-hop [the term for the youth culture that includes rap music] is and will always be a culture of the African-American minority. But it has become an international language." So who are ' typical' listeners to rap? Although rap is liked and appreciated by many people, it seems mainly intended for young black males. So do black females like it for the same kinds of reason? What about young white people (male and female)? What about older people? To what extent does the appeal of rap change from group to group?

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It is obviously difficult to answer these questions without carrying out wide research. However, the last question above matters because, as was seen in the last chapter, rap lyrics are important and express the experiences of rappers quite realistically, and it is possible that listeners with the same kinds of social experience will respond to rap more completely. For example, if we imagine a rich forty-five year old white woman living in St. Petersburg, the typical rap lyrics may not be so important to her as to a black eighteen year-old living in Harlem, New York. But here we have to remember an important point that was made by W. E. Perkins quoted in Chapter One: in rap, he says, " The beat is the structure around which the lyrics are developed, and samples of selected phrases from previously recorded music, jingles, solos, and so on play second fiddle" (see note 2, page 5 above). Probably it is this beat and also the possibilities of expressive dancing that go with it that makes rap so widely popular.

However, rap cannot be really rap without the lyrics playing a big part. So we can ask: when people choose to listen to rap music, what exactly is it that they identify with ' rap'? Is it simply the musical style, fast rhythmical speaking with a very basic melody, or is it something else, the ' spirit' of this kind of music? Someone who likes rap might turn on the TV and hear a ' rap song' advertising, for example, breakfast cereal, but certainly they would not consider this to be real rap. For a song to be real rap it is not enough to imitate the musical style, but the lyrics must also be about the kinds of things that rappers sing about. These lyrics need to be realistic and unsentimental.

This implies that people who are drawn to real rap are interested in the ‘ picture of life’ that it communicates and not just in the beat, even if they do not share that kind of life themselves. Of course they also enjoy the musical style, but this is most likely because that musical style is very effective in communicating what the lyrics say. It is also very energetic, and in performance is accompanied by a certain style of movement.

Young people love to express themselves through dancing. However, dancing itself is not a socially ‘ meaningless’ kind of expression. Typical rap dancing is both ‘ masculine’ and ‘ African’ in spirit. Katrina Hazzard-Donald says,

I was ambivalent about the hip hop phenomenon [which includes rap] until I noticed the dancing that accompanied the rapping; It was energetic, athletic, and noticeably male dominated, using a very African movement vocabulary.... Like most African dance styles, these [styles] exhibit angularity, asymmetry, polyrhythmic sensitivity, derision themes, segmentation and delineation of body parts, earth-centeredness and percussive performance.

Thus this kind of dancing is also an expression of the culture of the intended rap audience, young black males, not of their poverty or of crime or drug use, but their African roots. For them this dancing is a way to celebrate their identity. Other kinds of audiences can try to imitate this style of dancing but it will never mean the same thing to them, even if they really love it.

What in my opinion makes rap widely popular, especially amongst young people, is its energy. For some types of audience, this energy is a kind of

social ‘rebellion’. Rebellion is usually not explicit in the lyrics, but in the ‘attitude’ of the performers (as the name of N. W. A, Niggas With Attitude, says). Through this, black listeners gain a sense of confidence, even power, and of pride in their identity.

ANALYSIS

Rap, as was said above, is part of ‘hip hop culture’. According to Katrina Hazzard-Donald,

Hip hop appears at the crucial juncture of postindustrial stagnation, increased family dissolution, and a weakened struggle for black economic and political rights. Might one expect the pressures of mutually antagonistic social forces such as high unemployment, heightened job competition, and expectations of conspicuous consumption to influence both the popular expressive culture and the culture-creating apparatus of the community? I say yes. It is no coincidence that many youth of the hip hop generation have never known the relative security that some of their parents and even grandparents knew.

This quotation says that the general economic and social situation affects a cultural expression like rap music. Therefore we can also assume that rap music reflects the general economic and social situation. It was shown in Chapter One that the lyrics of rap are often about violence or poverty, trouble with the police, and so on – the kind of the things the rappers and their main intended audience meet in their every day lives. In Chapter Two it was seen that the style of dance is also an important part of the appeal of

rap. Probably this dance style also expresses the socio-economic situation, but in a much more indirect way than the lyrics do.

It can be argued that it is the rap dance style that makes rap more positive and optimistic in spirit than the lyrics on their own suggest it would be. Therefore, while it is true that rap lyrics, consisting of violence, sex and sexism, are an accurate reflection of the typical experiences of the rappers' own lives, the audience experiences this 'realism' in relation to a whole musical style that expresses energy and a sense of identity, especially African roots. It is both these elements together that make up the great appeal of rap.

According to Anthony Bozza, Hip-hop, in comparison to other African-American musical traditions – blues, jazz and rock and roll – has remained truest to its roots for the thirty years it has existed. It is possibly the most potent, least altered African-American cultural expression in history. Hip-hop has evolved technically, but its basic theme has survived: self-improvement with style. The earliest rap records, like those released a week ago, were about getting money, living better, having a party, having sex, defying mainstream society, and looking really good while you do it.... Rap broadcast inner-city realities and established rebel stance – that no hardship would keep the minorities who pioneered hip-hop from living, to the fullest, on their own terms.

While this 'message' of rap is probably strongest and most meaningful for young black people, and perhaps also for the youth of other relatively poor

minority groups such as Hispanics in the USA, it is also easy to see how it makes rap music attractive to young people in general.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen that violence, sexism and sexually explicit language do exist in the lyrics of rap music, and that this is part of the ‘realistic’ use of “inner-city realities”, as Bozza calls them. However, to understand the role these lyrics play in rap music it has been necessary to understand their context, especially rap dancing and the wider hip-hop culture. In this context such lyrics are part of what Bozza calls the “rebel stance”. What attracts young people to rap is not the lyrics in themselves but the whole image that rap creates, as well as its sense of energy and identity.