

definitely have a unique style of dress.

A fourth area of hip hop is the *language* used by those within the subculture. Dancers and rappers in general seem to have a brand of language that only they can really understand. The average person cannot understand rap language, which is precisely why it is a part of the hip hop subculture. It is a language catered to the masses of black people. And only those closest to the masses can understand this language. Margo Crawford said she couldn't understand the language, when she worked in a housing project.

"I lived in the projects until I was seventeen, but when I came back to work among my people, I was totally lost. I literally had to have an interpreter so that I could understand the language of people in the projects, nor could they understand me. When I said something, another person would have to explain what I was trying to say."

The rap language or street talk involves hundreds of different words, which have meanings that most people can't understand. People in the hip hop subculture have little trouble interpreting what the others are saying. Hip hop artists speak to each other in a language that is all their own.

The June 1990 Issue of *Ebony* published a guide to understanding hip hop vocabulary. The guide was designed to help parents communicate better with their children about hip hop. There are several fundamental words that every person should know before attempting to understand hip hop music.

def: good, excellent

def jams: good music

dis: short for disrespect or to insult someone

M.C.: another word for rapper

stupid: means "good" in hip hop

sweat: hassle

word: affirmative or that's right

With these few words, you can start educating yourself about hip hop.

A final area of hip hop involves *rapping*, an art form that has a tremendous influence upon the subculture. Rapping involves talking in beat to the music rather than actually singing, and most of the time the words rhyme. Rapping has evolved as one of the most important aspects of hip hop because without it, the world might still ignore this subculture.

But how did rapping come about? Did people just get up one day and start rapping to music?

Origins of Rap Music

Rap music has served as the aspect of hip hop that has given artists their real voice. Graffiti involves painting, which

is of course a form of expression. Fashion and dancing are also forms of expression. But rap music has legitimately given hip hop artists a voice in society — a voice that people really listen to and want to understand. It is an art form that can appeal to everyone.

Harry Allen, a hip hop activist, said rap has revolutionized black music. Mr. Allen serves as public relations director for the rap group Public Enemy. He is one of only a handful of people who can qualify as a rap scholar. He recently led a panel discussion at UNC-CH on the hip hop subculture.

"Hip-Hip is the New Bop; the best thing to happen to music in the last 50 years: an African art form created by African young people on their terms. If Europeans had invented hip hop, it would be given a lot more respect than it is now."

Most musical historians want to date the beginning of rap during the late 1970s or at some other time in black music history. However, it is obvious that such an art form did not develop over night. Rapping is an art form that has existed as long as people of African descent have lived in the world. When you look at current rap artists, you should not rule out that they are a direct result of an African past.

Margo Crawford said rap is a part of a cycle of culture that never begins and ends. "A culture doesn't come on the scene. A culture endures and continues to grow and prosper through the centuries. Everything black relates to something else in our history. Black music has moved from gospel to jazz to bop to hip hop."

Harry Allen also feels that music scholars cannot deny a link to the African past in rap music. Allen feels that the concept of "funky" music comes from Africa. "The only way to get black people interested in rap was to make it funky. And only black people know how to make songs funky, which is a dividing line between people of African and non-African descent. Elvis was loud, but he was never funky."

The link to Africa seen in rap music is seen through the use of Africanisms, which are elements which link African-Americans to the Motherland. Africanisms include a wide range of actions that show the enduring connections that exist among people of African descent. One Africanism is the *body language* used by rappers. The dancing and rhythm seen in rap artists can be traced to African people. Margo Crawford believes MC Hammer's moves are indicative of a true Africanism.

"MC Hammer just didn't get up one day and start dancing like that. He's

using the same moves used in dances by people in Nigeria hundreds of years ago. Hammer also has 10 or more people on the stage at once. He spends part of the time with his dancers, and part of the time dancing in the front of them, which is no mistake. His moves resemble those of our African ancestors."

Another Africanism is the *call and response* used by many rappers to incite the crowd. Call and response historically has been a large part of African-American culture. The "call" involves a rapper who yells to the crowd, and then the crowd "responds" to his call. The call and response was prevalent especially during the early stages of rap in the nation.

Another Africanism used primarily by disc jockeys who work with rappers is *scratching*. Scratching occurs when a DJ scratches a record to make a unique sound that enhances the rap. Scratching did not really become popular in black music, until rap came to the forefront. Andrei L. Strobert, a musician and scholar, linked scratching to Africa in an article in *Essence* magazine. The article, which appeared in the April 1989 edition, was written by Harry Allen.

"The scratch you hear in hip hop is similar to the African *sekere*," Strobert said. "A *sekere* is a big gourd with beads around it. If you think about scratching, you see how it connects. The scratch is *shk-shk*, while the *sekere* sound is basically the same thing."

Rap in the beginning

Although rap music can be traced back to Africa, most music scholars still insist that it came on the scene during the late 1970s. During this time period, rappers who had previously only performed on the streets, began to receive airplay on radio stations across the country.

Brian Austin agrees that 1979 is about the time that rap came into its own. "When people say rap came onto the scene, what they really mean is that it acquired a public face. No one paid it any attention publicly before that year. Rap hit people's ears and raised their consciousness as to the problems faced by oppressed people."

The year 1979 seemed to be one in which rappers began to receive recording contracts. The first officially recorded rap record was "King Tim III" released by the Fatback Band in 1979. This record has often been overlooked in hip hop history because of records released by other groups that year. The Sugarhill Gang was also a pioneer rap group, which released a single titled "Rappers Delight" in 1979. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five led by MC Melle-



Mel, recorded a hit single, "The Message" and released it in 1979. The "Message" was a controversial song because it talked about the realities of ghetto life.

Kurtis Blow, who has been nicknamed the "Godfather of Rap", emerged about the same time as those early groups. Blow released "The Breaks" and "Christmas Rappin'" in 1979. "The Breaks" went platinum (1 million copies sold), while he became the first rapper to sign with a major recording company, Mercury. In 1989, Blow released his eighth album, "Back by Popular Demand", which firmly established his place in rap history.

Since the late 1970s, rap has moved through several stages. Each stage shows how the art form has changed within the hip hop subculture. The *Pioneer Phase* from 1979-1981, involved a process of introducing rap into popular culture. Pioneer rappers, such as Kurtis Blow, brought the world a new type of music that before had only been heard by those in the cities. The *Reinforcer Phase* from 1981-1984, involved artists who reaffirmed rap as a music form. Reinforcers picked up where the pioneers ended and refused to allow rap to die out. Rappers during this period include Run DMC who made their debut with a self-titled LP released in 1984, which sold 500,000 copies. Their second LP, "Raising Hell" went triple platinum. They are the probably the most famous rappers from that stage. The *Solidification Phase* from 1984-present, involves rappers who have solidified rap as an art form in the nation. These artists have proven that rap is no fluke because it is here to stay. These rappers include anyone from Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew with his release of "The Show" in 1985 to MC Hammer today.