

Influences on Rap

Rap as it exists in the Hip Hop subculture is influenced by many different elements. Of course, rap is influenced by Africanisms and the streets. However, two other important aspects that are overlooked are *geography* and the *middle class*.

The geography influence stems from the differences between east coast and west coast rappers. The first rappers to record songs came from east coast cities such as New York and Newark, New Jersey. Consequently, east coast rappers argue that they are the best artists. Tension over geography has led to feuds and rifts in the rap industry. Brian Austin argues that you can see differences between the styles of east and west coast rappers.

"East coast rappers have moved heavily towards nationalism in rap. They're concerned with Afrocentrism, black education and black pride. On the contrary, west coast rap takes a harsher and grittier stance on the world. West coast rappers from places like Los Angeles use a lot of violence in their music that isn't seen in other rappers."

The middle class influence in rap stems from the fact that all rappers do not come from the inner cities or the ghettos. Over the past several years, rappers such as Fresh Prince and Young MC have emerged in the industry. Rappers from middle class backgrounds portray a different side of life than other rappers. Rappers who come from the streets, such as Niggers With Attitudes (NWA) sometimes reject the clean-cut image presented by middle class rappers. Still, the middle class influence is now very much a part of the hip hop subculture.

Rap Controversy and Censorship

Rap has been a target of controversy from the very first rap recording. Rappers have often been accused of inciting violence, mistreatment of women, racism and anti-semitism. Several rap concerts were cancelled during the early 1980s because people thought they might lead to riots. Current controversies have arisen over obscenity and explicit lyrics. Why has rap been given such a bad rap?

Harry Allen feels that the controversy over rap lyrics weakens the whole idea behind hip hop music. "Hip hop is descriptive and often attempts to be prescriptive. African-American people are using music to make sense of our circumstances."

Brian Austin said that people misinterpret the lyrics and develop stereotypes about rap artists and black people. "People believe that you have all of

these rap artists who want to overthrow capitalism and start riots because they've been oppressed, which is not the case at all. Then society interprets this to mean that all youth in the inner cities want to cause riots or unrest."

Dr. Margaret Blanchard, a journalism professor, said censors always go in behind popular music. Dr. Blanchard teaches Journalism 160, a class on the history of free speech in the nation.

"Rap music is the cause of the day. Back in the 60s and 70s, there was a campaign against the Beatles and Peter Paul and Mary. At one time, censors claimed that heavy metal music led to devil worship. Now rap has become a big thing, so censors have to go after it. In a few years, they'll change it to something else again."

One rap group in particular, *Niggers With Attitudes* (NWA), has caused controversy with its violent lyrics and profanity. NWA's members are all former gang members including Eazy-E. Much of the group's music reflects the violence of ghetto life in south central L.A., such as gangbangers, drive-by shootings and police sweeps. They been labeled as police haters and racists. Ice Cube served as the primary song writer for NWA. NWA's first album "Straight Outta Compton", which was released in late 1988, has achieved platinum status. Eazy-E's solo LP, "Eazy Duz It" has almost reached double platinum status. NWA was watched by the FBI after it released a song called "F—k the Police." Ice Cube left the group last year after a dispute over money. He released his debut album in 1990 titled "AmeriKKKas Most Wanted", which contains the songs "The Nigger You Love to Hate" and "Who's the Mack."

NWA and Ice Cube do not seem to glorify violence but present their side of the world. It would be silly for them to rap about nice, clean wholesome things. They rap about what they know, and what they know is threatening to the status quo.

Margo Crawford said rap controversies arise because black people are out of touch with their community.

"Upper and middle class blacks don't know what's going on with the masses of black people. As an educated black woman, society tells me I should turn my nose up at rap music. This shows that a lot of rap controversy stems from people not knowing who rappers are and what they're trying to do. Rappers take us by the hand, and say let's take a walk into the black community."

Minorities in the Hip Hop Subculture

The rap industry is a very competi-

tive profession as hundreds of different artists fight to earn recognition. If you don't be careful, someone will come along and knock you out of the industry. Competition also emerges when rappers leave their groups, which is what happened with the split between Biz Markie and Big Daddy Kane. The rap profession has been dominated by black males from the very start. There has been little room for the emergence of others. Over the past several years, the field has seen the appearance of black women and white rappers in the rap world. Both groups are a definite minority within hip hop.

Brian Austin said that black women rappers got left behind because all rappers were trying to succeed in the music industry. "A lot of rap is about staking out space. Everyone is trying to find his place. A lot of rap also deals with masculinity, which excludes female rappers."

One of the first female groups to emerge on the scene was Salt-N-Pepa. Salt-N-Pepa became the first female rap group to hit the charts. Their first album, "Hot, Cool and Vicious" went platinum in 1986, and their second album, "A Salt with a Deadly Pepa" sold 500,000 copies after three weeks on the shelf. Their third LP "Black's Magic" contains the gold single "Expression" released in late 1989. Salt-N-Pepa are important because they paved the way for other female rappers such as MC Lyte, Queen Latifah and Roxanne Shante.

White rappers have had a hard time gaining recognition in the field because no one took them seriously at first. When the Beastie Boys released their first album "Licensed to Ill" in 1985, people began to say that white people could possibly rap. The group was the first white rap group to hit the charts and their album went platinum. The Beastie Boys laid the foundation for other white rappers to follow such as 3rd Bass. Third Bass, led by MC Serch, released the "Cactus Album" in 1989 with the gold single "Gas Face". In 1990, Vanilla Ice, released his debut album song "Ice, Ice Baby", which has been certified as a gold single. Vanilla Ice's song went to the top of the charts quicker than any other rap record.

Margo Crawford said it is not surprising that white rappers have come into the music industry. "What you started out with was a group of street kids, rapping about their lives. Now you have white rappers rapping about something. White people had to step in and get their piece of the action and probably will eventually make more money than black artists."



Categories of Rappers

Rappers are a diverse group of individuals who have evolved in the hip hop subculture. People who don't understand rap usually lump all rappers into one category. They fail to see that there are distinct patterns that exist among musical artists in the hip hop subculture. Rappers often rap or perform in a particular way the majority of the time, which can lead to different categories. Over the past years, six types of rappers seem to have emerged in the music industry. Rappers in these categories are divided according to song lyrics and their stage presence. And sometimes there is a fine line between what rapper belongs in what category. Female as well as male rappers have been included wherever possible. The categories provide a systemized way to look at rappers in the hip hop subculture.

Idolists/Egotists

Idolist rappers are artists who boast and brag about themselves in the majority of their songs. These rappers seem to want the world to idolize them and can't get enough of talking about themselves. Rappers in this category love to "dis" other rappers by calling them sucker MCs. Idolists or Egotists are some of the most popular ones on the rap scene today. The number of rappers in this category is large and include *Heavy D & the Boyz*, who came on the scene with a 1987 song titled "Mr. Big Stuff." Heavy's latest album, "Big Tyme" contains the song "Girlz They Love Me". This song perpetuates Heavy's belief that he is indeed an "overweight lover." *Special Ed* falls into the idolists category. His