

Are rappers' free samples worth paying for?

Back in the day, say 1978 or so, the Sugarhill Gang rap group recorded the first popular rap hit, "Rapper's Delight." (You know, the hip-hop, hippy-to-the-hippy-hip-hop-hoppin'-you-don't-stop-rockin'-to-the-bang-bang-boogie-say-up-jump-the-boogie-to-the-rhythm-of-the-boogiedee-be song!) Anyway, the song used the melodies from Chic's popular soul hit, "Good Times." It sounded good so everything was groovy.

But now in the '90s, things aren't so groovy. This use of another's work has now been officially called "sampling," and it is a big topic of debate in the music industry. Rap became a significant part of popular music in the late '80s and many critics even called rap the new evolution of music — something that was needed to burst the droll in rock'n'roll. And when rap became popular, so did sampling.

OMNIBUS. All this and more.

TIM LITTLE

The Music Scene

Sampling really didn't start to get noticed until 1986 when Eric B. & Rakim used the "pieces and bits of all the hip-hop hits" of James Brown. Raps to this point were mostly Run-D.M.C./Kurtis Blow/Whodini/Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five/Soul Sonic Force bass-snare beat songs. No real melodies were needed or used in the new style of hip-hop, distinguishing these artists from the likes of James Brown. Brown had been dubbed 'the funkiest man ever', and in rap circles, his arrangements based on his outrageous melodies did not appeal at the time.

Then came the trend of using others' melodies in rap. And in the '90s, it has progressed (some would

say digressed) to robbing from the most popular songs in music such as M.C. Hammer's use of Rick James's "Superfreak" in "U Can't Touch This" and Vanilla Ice's use of the David Bowie/Queen song "Under Pressure" in "Ice Ice Baby."

But many musicians are upset, for good reason, that rap artists are using their real songs in less than genuine raps. These musicians are claiming copyright infringement and are suing several rappers. For example, the popular '60s group, The Turtles, sued De La Soul a while back for using one of their songs in De La's "Transmitting Live From Earth."

So now comes the big debate — is sampling wrong? Is it improper use of another's work?

The answer, my children, is yes and no. Jurisdiction wasn't necessary when the Sugarhill Gang did "Rapper's Delight." After all, it was the only one of its kind. Nobody thought it would become what it is today. But now that it has hit mega-hip in the annals of rap evolution, something needs to be done about this sly sampling and coy copying business.

What the situation boils down to is percentage, respect and taste. First off, let's throw away beats from the argument. Too many songs have similar beats and rhythms and as Flavor-Flav from Public Enemy said in one song, "You can't copyright no beat." So there.

Percentage deals with the amount



The Beastie Boys know the proper method of sampling.

of time another's work is used on a single rap song. Whoever the "proper music authorities" are, they should decree the maximum percentage that should be allowed. Here's an example to make things simpler: 100 percent of "U Can't Touch This" used melodies of James's "Superfreak" — wait, that's not right. It was 95 percent (I forgot about the "break it down...stop, hammer-time" part).

If the "Supreme Music Court" decreed that the maximum percentage allowed was 20 percent, "U Can't Touch This" could only use "Superfreak" in the chorus parts. Understand? This seems troublesome, but it could be done.

Of course, the percentage judgement could be done away with if the original artist gave a rapper consent to use his or her song. This was demonstrated (sort of) when Bruce Springsteen said that 2 Live Crew could use "Born In The U.S.A." for the Crew's "Banned In The U.S.A."

Respect is another fine way to deal with sampling. De La Soul acknowledged the melodies for "Eye Know" were created by music-god Donald Fagen (as was established in the last *Music Scene*). This has been done in other pop songs like when Sting printed the music bars he "borrowed" (not sampled) from Sergei Prokofiev for his song, "Russians."

This acknowledgement can also be done within a song, like when ABC used the bass beats from "Tears Of A Clown" in their Smokey Robinson tribute, "When Smokey Sings."

And lastly, good taste is modeled by the best rap artists. These masters only use snippets of other songs and they do it very creatively. De La Soul, 3rd Bass and A Tribe Called Quest employed such techniques on their albums, but the best example is how the Beastie Boys soul-sampled on both of their albums.

The Beasties used mostly spot

samples in their work. Good examples include "Hey Ladies," "The New Style" and "Shake Your Rump."

One way that rap artists are not offending other musicians is by changing the scope of the song entirely. For example, Father M.C.'s "If You Do For Me" is totally comprised of Cheryl Lynn's "Got To Be Real." With different keyboard work and a different chorus, the song is completely altered. L.L. Cool J. also did this on "Around The Way Girl."

But what looks like the new style of sampling has been done by the dance group Deee-Lite, who mixed old songs and their own music together to create a revolutionary delectable hybrid. This allows originality and creativity to be more dominant than sampling.

So is sampling wrong? Is it improper use of another's work? The answer is "no" when the above-mentioned things are done and done properly. But it is "yes" when an artist doesn't do any of these things. It becomes the same thing as stealing and that's it — clear and simple.

Rap artists for the '90s should be safe and stick by the rule for kids before dialing a 900 number: "Get permission first."

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In the last *Music Scene*, Donald Fagen was the feature and several Omni readers sent "interesting" letters to the Scene. Bailey Irwin and Glenn Holzapfel notified me that Fagen has been performing in New York with several other artists in a show called the "Rock and Soul Revue." They also informed me that he's doing some studio work. Bless you for your information — I can rest easy now.

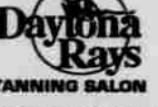
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