

Arts cont'd

yo! bum rush this article

by Andrew Sun

The influence of Afro-American popular music to Western culture is always fascinating. February being Black History Month, it is quite appropriate to look at the latest innovation to hit the contemporary music scene — hip hop. From controversial groups like Public Enemy to ego tripping stylists like L.L. Cool J and cute pop-charts like Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince, rap music has largely been misunderstood and excluded from mainstream airwaves. (Most recently Public Enemy was banned with Much-Music, which rarely played the band anyway).

The essence of this new social and musical phenomenon is its distinct language: the symbols, metaphors and dialects urban street youths use as an alternative to the mainstream.

"The sampling and scratching of records completely inverts our perception of making music"

In first person narration, the d.j.s rap about themselves, what they think, what they want and how they feel. It is not uncommon for an artist to refer to other rappers, other songs or even songs by themselves. Hip hop's immediacy is what makes it not just a musical style but a fascinating cultural phenomenon and social movement.

Hip hop is first and foremost a music form. Its driving bassline comes straight from old r&b or funk records. The rapping is derived from Jamaican dub-reggae and infused with an urgency reminiscent of the fire and brimstone elements of gospel and the limit pushing players of bebop jazz. It's a music with an attitude, an attitude not that different from funk's hey day.

Although it has strong roots, hip hop is also highly revolutionary. Traditional instruments are thrown out the window and most hip hop crews have almost no background in musical training. The pioneering performers come from the streets of New York where socio-economic conditions could hardly afford them access to musical instruments let alone training. From this environment, rapping started with ghetto kids creating lyrics and rhymes to

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instrumental dance tracks; making it the American equivalent to the popular dub-poetry prominent in Jamaica for years. It's not surprising, however, as the art form started tracing its roots when groups like Boogie Down Productions started incorporating reggae into their sound. From this beginning, hip hop (the term 'rap' used as a noun is associated more with earlier recordings of the music) has continued its evolution with radical methods.

Besides rapping, a major component of the music is the innovative manipulation of turntables. In the mid-'70s, disc-jockey, by mixing records on the beats, combining grooves together or simply scratching the record, invented a new substitute for musical instruments. Using turntables, kids were able to create sounds and rhythms to go along with the rapper. As techniques and technologies became more sophisticated, a dj became standard part of any hip hop crew.

Rather than creating new sounds, hip hop's innovation is in the creative sampling of old breakbeats, guitar riffs and even singers (James Brown is undoubtedly the most sampled man alive). This revolutionary do-it-yourself form of music, not only challenges all previous notions of playing music, but also raises new legal questions regarding copyright. Unauthorized use of records have prompted many artists to fight lawsuits even though the sampled sounds are often unrecognizable as part of some previous tune.

The sampling and scratching of records completely inverts our perception of making music. Records have become tools for making sounds. Turntables, previously a medium for playing recorded music, are now instruments for the creation of new music. The dj, now becomes an artist. Anyone creative enough can make their own music. From the limiting confines of poverty and slums, a new art form and communication tool has emerged. Rap is a truly new musical idiom that brings with it a new and indigenous culture.

Rap was nurtured on the city streets where it (along with break-dancing) sparked the competition between rival neighbourhood gangs. As the form matured and spread, rap gradually moved to suburban terrains and thrived



among disenfranchised middle class black kids the same way punk appealed to whites. For many Black families, hip hop became the first music that alienated parents from their children. Its political aggressiveness and explicit sexuality divided generations who were used to listening together to artists like Aretha Franklin, the Supremes or Duke Ellington.

Hip hop feeds on the rebellious energy and recklessness of youth. As a music devoid of conservatism and corporate interest, it has no need to be safe. Especially among the suburbanites, its potential for offensiveness is exploited to the limit, by kids who reject the dull and conforming wastelands of the 'burbs.

Neophytes to hip hop often find it difficult to understand the lyrics. The words are familiar but they are filled with colloquialism to codify the message. Words and phrases take on new meaning. 'Dope' is a synonym for drugs but, in hip hop, it also means something very good. The slangs and euphemisms are an attempt by urban youths to create a language of their own.

Not surprisingly, rappers almost always give themselves a new name as part of their initiation into hip hop. The names assumed are often mystifying in their denotation. They signify something besides the individual. What is the 'D' in Chuck D? What is the origin of the Flavor Flav, Ice-T, Daddy-O or Schooly D? These coded names are ways hip hop separates itself from the rest of society. It keeps the enemies at bay and clearly distinguishes its allies.

Black art and literature have historically displayed the theme of an innate alienation from the rest of American society. Rather than seeing itself trying unsuccessfully to penetrate the white world — as in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* — hip hop culture relishes its outsider status as freedom fighters with all the romanticism that it implies, by turning a negative image into a positive one. Hence Public Enemy's album title, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*.

As outsiders not surprisingly,

rap relates to the metaphor of the criminal in society. The attitude seems to be: If society's idea of law and order keeps blacks oppressed then let me be a criminal. Ice-T is a rapper who thrives from this imagery. His music is 'dope' so therefore he is a 'pusher' who rejects drugs and pushes music. By inverting the stereotype he also changes a negative image into a positive one. The criminal metaphor is also a signifier of society's corruption. In hip hop's hyperlogic, the only way to succeed in America is to be a criminal. If the government can behave in a manner similar to organized crime, then it is no different than the local crack dealer on the corner.

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The modification of language and words in rap music gives it a paradigmatic translation similar to the sampling of old records in new tunes. By changing the context of the symbol it takes on a new meaning. Indeed hip hop is post-modernist in its methods.

The potency of rap is its unrepressed honesty. While its social and political statements are too

painful for some to admit, the downright misogyny in the worst sexist recordings are offensive beyond redemption. These two extremes have the same effect of keeping hip hop on the fringe. For the time being, it is still a music without restriction. It is expression on a very primal level.

What hip hop does have an abundance of is 'ego.' Much of rap music indulges in either macho or material boasting that suggests an attitude of superiority. From its early days as a contest between gangs, ritualized boasting was a constructive substitute for street violence. The ability of each rapper to defend himself, depended entirely on his ability to improvise creatively and innovatively. The incredible speed with

which rap evolved is tied to this need for novel ingenuity.

Black pride also manifests itself in a strangely materialistic way. From the gold chains around their neck to the cars on album covers to the suggestive conquests in the lyrics, the flagrant display of symbols of wealth is almost a parody of capitalistic success. Rather than denouncing these values as oppressive or corrupt, hip hop pushes capitalistic values to the extreme. They are hyper-capitalists. They will out-cut-throat anybody in a cut-throat world. Keeping in mind the hip hop mentality is born from a world of crime, drugs and gangs, the 'survival of the fittest' philosophy takes precedent to pacifist goodwill. In the words of Malcolm X, "By all means necessary!"

Hip hop may be the latest black prodigy to blossom in popular culture but, despite its revolutionary style, it is also related to other musical contributions from the African-American culture. Rap may not be a direct descendant but the family traits are there. Originating out of the slums of New York, it is not a product of education but of sheer inventiveness and personal expression. The same description could describe Jelly Roll Morton, Scott Joplin's ragtime piano playing or evolution in the 40s with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

The oral tradition has always been strong in black history and rhythm is nearly always associated with any black oral endeavour. Hip hop is nearly all rhythm and no melody. The manipulation of language is a black art dating back to Africa and it continues today even with people like Eddie Murphy.

The analogies with jazz are plenty. As with bebop, public and critical acceptance has been slow and serious; consideration of the musical idiom is just starting. Both styles revolutionized the language of sound and encouraged a new mode of thinking. Simply put, they share the quality of being black in America and are proud of it.

Still think rap is just a fad? Don't believe the hype!

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