

## Hip-Hop's Irrepressible Refashionability

### Phases in the Cultural Production of Black Youth

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Since its first mass media appearances in the early 1980s, hip-hop has served as an increasingly prominent site for discussions about African American cultural production and its relationship to troubling socioeconomic indicators for black youth. According to both defenders and detractors, hip-hop reflects its circumstances, giving voice, form, and meaning to the challenging conditions from which it issues, including urban impoverishment and unemployment, a failing education system, institutional racism and police brutality, and the scourge of drugs and violent crime. As such, hip-hop has both been championed and condemned as a powerfully informing force, shaping the very culture that it would seem to represent by offering powerful scripts, myths, and all manner of cultural resources to be taken up and reworked by youthful practitioners (Rose 2008; McWhorter 2008). While dramatizing a set of tragic social problems and bringing them to center stage in American and global popular culture, hip-hop stands as neither an easy scapegoat nor a simple solution for policymakers, eluding gross generalization with its wide variety of shapes and forms. Hip-hop's projection of black male authenticity may appear at times utterly dominant, but such notions have also been shown to be both unstable and remarkably malleable. Moreover, whether at the level of noncommercial production or modest entrepreneurial efforts—which continue in myriad ways, enabled by creative uses of new media technologies—or in full integration with the entertainment industry (Charnas 2010), one can behold in hip-hop's aesthetics a great dynamism, an undeniable degree of self-determination, and a prizing of innovation which together might give both

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skeptics and devotees new ways to engage and understand hip-hop and black youth alike.

Public debates about the genre are far too often bogged down by objections to the specific contents of hip-hop productions. Here I argue that hip-hop's discontents, if you will, would do better to put questions of content aside, at least momentarily, in order to appreciate the importance of craft, innovation, media literacy, and other practices that have made hip-hop such an enduring and inspiring force in the lives of young people, especially black youth. To refocus questions about the relationship between black youth cultural production and socioeconomic outcomes, this chapter offers an historical overview foregrounding hip-hop's power and potential as a set of forms and procedures—in particular, how its sonic and social priorities have remained remarkably consistent even as they have shifted in step with changes in technology, economic opportunity, and sociocultural circumstances. Specifically, I contend that hip-hop's roots in and continued use of repurposed consumer-end technologies, from turntables to Twitter, deeply informs its aesthetic principles and possibilities as a constructive force in American social life.

### Brass Knuckles and Wheels of Steel (1973–1979)

In the 1970s, the Bronx was like a place besieged, isolated and impoverished by urban planning that favored other parts of the city and other citizens, gutted by a rash of insurance arson, terrorized by gang warfare and police brutality, and neglected by local government. But its residents persevered, listened to music and danced at parties, went to school and tried to look fresh for their peers, all of which demanded a creative and flexible approach to self-fashioning, especially for the growing numbers of migrants from the Caribbean and their children. Amidst such poverty and malaise that a 1977 visit from President Carter focused international attention on the Bronx's seemingly shell-shocked streets, a remarkable, resilient, and eventually global phenomenon took root as local culture. Hip-hop's tale of origins has become well worn by now, but particular details—namely, the refashioning of consumer electronics and musical recordings, youth culture, and public space—merit special emphasis. Attending to these details of hip-hop's origins, we can better appreciate how hip-hop emerges as a distinctive set of practices, ideas, and institutions that have been widely transmitted and significantly transformed in the decades since.

As the story goes, hip-hop was born on a summer night in 1973 in a modest recreation room on the ground floor of 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, an apartment building in the West Bronx (Chang 2005). It was there that Clive Campbell, better known as Kool Herc, hosted a party with his older sister Cindy, looking to raise some cash for back-to-school clothes. Born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, Campbell moved to the Bronx in 1967 to join his mother. Although not yet a teenager when he left Jamaica, Campbell was well familiar with the key local institutions known as soundsystems: mobile disco units operating in local dance halls, with a branded reputation based on the power and clarity of their speakers, the cachet of the records they played, and the talents of their personnel. Most crucial to any soundsystem, after the system itself, are the selector, tasked with playing and manipulating the music, and the DJ (or disc jockey), who, in the Jamaican context, rarely touches any records but rather presides over the event, commenting on or singing along with the music, exhorting attendees to dance, and generally turning the experience of listening to recordings into something closer to a locally customized, live performance. Knowing the importance of these elements, Herc borrowed a powerful Shure P.A. system from his father, an occasional soundman for local R&B acts, and played the role of selector (or DJ in American parlance), handpicking and cueing up the records, as well as master of ceremonies, or MC, using a microphone to greet and praise party-goers with short rhyming routines, hype the musical selections, make announcements, and encourage dancing.

Like any good DJ, Herc sought to respond to the demands of his audience. Given his context, this entailed embracing and extending certain soundsystem techniques—namely, the license to manipulate a record rather than honoring the integrity of a particular performance—even while departing somewhat starkly from what one might have heard at a dance in Jamaica. Despite borrowing liberally from soundsystem culture, Herc did not play reggae at the party. At least among his peers, Jamaican music and style had yet to undergo the cool recuperation that eventually followed Bob Marley's success and, perhaps more important in New York, the violent dominance of the drug trade by Jamaican gangs, or posses, in the 1980s (Gunst 1995; Marshall 2005). Rather, just as Campbell made an effort to swap his Jamaican accent for a more local one, he played soul, funk, and driving disco tracks—especially records featuring stripped-down, percussion-led break-downs, or “breakbeats”—in place of reggae anthems (Chang 2005; Marshall 2007). Having noticed that specific

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1 passages on the records seemed to get the otherwise nonchalant crowd  
 2 moving, Herc took the liberties so common to Jamaican soundsystem  
 3 practice and began making his own live edits of the songs. Later dubbed  
 4 the “merry-go-round” technique, Herc would attempt to extend these  
 5 breakbeats by picking up the needle toward the end of the break and  
 6 dropping it back down again at the beginning. This innovative isola-  
 7 tion and extension of popular breaks lit a fire under the feet of Bronx  
 8 denizens looking for a little uplift, especially the so-called b-boys (or  
 9 break boys) who symbiotically developed acrobatic routines in step with  
 10 the explosive soundtrack. Herc and his sister Cindy began to throw par-  
 11 ties regularly, and the audience steadily grew—as did Herc’s crew, now  
 12 including dedicated MCs, such as Coke La Rock, and a coterie of flashy  
 13 dancers. Eventually, running out of room at 1520 Sedgwick, Herc relo-  
 14 cated to nearby Cedar Park where, repurposing what little civic infrastruc-  
 15 ture remained in a place haunted by the politics of neglect, electricity  
 16 from a utility pole powered his soundsystem. In contrast to clubs, where  
 17 cover charges and age restrictions kept teenagers out, these “park jams”  
 18 were active incubators, stylistically and socially, of a new kind of pub-  
 19 lic youth culture. In this way, Herc’s burgeoning audience, some driven  
 20 west by gang violence in the South Bronx, helped essentially to coproduce  
 21 a remarkable phenomenon: a vibrant party scene where local culture  
 22 thrived as DJs, MCs, and dancers wrested new forms out of the resources  
 23 at hand.

24 Often the story of hip-hop’s beginnings focuses on a lack of access to  
 25 such things as music education, musical instruments, and so forth, posi-  
 26 tioning the use of turntables and records as a remarkable example of  
 27 resourcefulness (e.g., Rose 1994, 34–35; Sublette 2008, 186; West 2009,  
 28 116). But this perspective, as if hip-hop would not have happened if Bronx  
 29 youth could have taken trumpet lessons, can also obscure the deliberate,  
 30 vanguard embrace of electronics and recordings by enterprising DJs  
 31 working to create their own musical and social worlds. It is worth pausing  
 32 for a moment to appreciate the cultural revolution entailed by turning  
 33 forms of consumption (i.e., buying records) into modes of production,  
 34 transforming asynchronous consumer culture (we all listen to these records  
 35 in private contexts) into real-time participatory culture (not only do we  
 36 listen together in the same space, we are all party to the fundamental re-  
 37 creation of these tracks). The rise of the DJ in hip-hop’s formative years  
 S38 thus offers an excellent example of how cultural production is shaped by  
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the interplay between structural conditions on the one hand and acts of improvisation and innovation on the other. Approaching polished audio commodities as incomplete performances to be activated in a live setting had precedent in reggae culture, but hip-hop artists refashioned this practice in distinctive and influential ways. Just as Herc had localized and transformed Jamaican soundsystem style, his rivals and acolytes extended these innovations according to the demands of local tastes. Hence, Joseph Saddler, a.k.a. Grandmaster Flash, improved upon Herc's "merry-go-round" technique with a more precise and smooth stitching together of breakbeats and other recorded fragments—innovations predicated upon Saddler's technical expertise (rigging up cues and crossfaders to facilitate the process), his admiration of the extended mixes of local disco mavens such as Pete DJ Jones, and finally, a fierce devotion to practice and improvement. Likewise, Grand Wizard Theodore, an apprentice of Flash, developed the technique of scratching records rhythmically—perhaps the most obvious hallmark of hip-hop musicianship. Today such reuse of previously recorded performances—most often in the form of digital sampling—stands as absolutely ubiquitous musical practice, regardless of genre.

The radical refashioning of Bronx sociality instigated by hip-hop extends beyond the cultural alchemy of turning consumer-end commodities into raw materials for collective creativity or public spaces into community havens; it applies also to the stunning transformation of Bronx gang culture in the wake of this musical phenomenon. Credit typically goes to the South Bronx's Afrika Bambaataa, an imposing, fearless ex-gang member with ecumenical tastes and a vision for harnessing hip-hop's energy into a genuine social movement among Bronx youth. Under the banner of the Universal Zulu Nation, Bambaataa invited local gang members to leave their colors and disputes at home and come jam together at his parties. In an artful sublimation of actual violence into symbolic clashes between performers, b-boy crews engaged in vigorous physical but generally noncontact battles, DJs competed with their selections and skills, MCs jockeyed for crowd approval, and graffiti writers took territorialism into greater and greater realms of abstraction and mutual regard. One obvious legacy of this shift in Bronx youth culture is the macho posturing and spectacular rivalries (or "beefs") that remain so central to hip-hop. Because its modes of performance and presentation emerge from a rather tough context, a fundamentally competitive and confrontational stance continues to undergird a great deal of hip-hop style. In other

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1 words, the genre's innovations with regard to questions of form are not  
 2 always so neatly separated from content. Of course, staging battles between  
 3 the Bronx's best DJs, MCs, and dancers also served to attract large audi-  
 4 ences, a boon for the occasional party charging a cover, revealing an  
 5 entrepreneurial logic at work as well. But economically speaking, the early  
 6 days of hip-hop made for modest returns on the blood, sweat, and tears of  
 7 the genre's pioneers.

8 By the late 1970s, hip-hop could be considered a modest commercial  
 9 success on one hand and an incredible aesthetic triumph on the other, but  
 10 history would soon show the former to be a mere product of shortsighted-  
 11 ness. Hip-hop was so tied to real-time social gatherings in its early years,  
 12 and so predicated on other musicians' recordings, that the idea of com-  
 13 mitting such performances to tape and selling them as musical commodi-  
 14 ties in their own right required a leap of logic. Recordings of parties were  
 15 made, of course, and tapes circulated informally and noncommercially,  
 16 but it was not until a seasoned and savvy record executive, Silvia Robinson  
 17 of Sugar Hill Records, saw the potential in the form that the recorded rap  
 18 song emerged as such, some six years after Here's back-to-school jam on  
 19 Sedgwick Avenue. Most of hip-hop's biggest names at that time were not  
 20 easily convinced or drawn away from the relatively lucrative party circuit,  
 21 so Robinson's first attempt to record hip-hop was more of a studio simula-  
 22 tion than a faithful rendering of contemporary party practice. Assembling  
 23 a ragtag crew of aspiring rappers under the name of the Sugar Hill Gang,  
 24 Robinson released a fifteen-minute single called "Rapper's Delight" that  
 25 stitched together original lyrics as well as a number of popular routines  
 26 drawn from such prominent MCs as Grandmaster Caz over a replayed  
 27 loop from Chic's "Good Times," then a current favorite among hip-hop  
 28 DJs. Despite its unusual length for a pop single, a genuine artifact of hip-  
 29 hop's sprawling, party-suited style, "Rapper's Delight" became a massive  
 30 hit on urban radio, selling millions of copies and ultimately offering the  
 31 first exposure to hip-hop for much of the world beyond the Bronx (Charnas  
 32 2010, 43).

33 The great success of the Sugar Hill Gang initiated a profound turn for  
 34 hip-hop aesthetics. If it had begun as a DJ- and dancer-oriented phenom-  
 35 enon, by the end of the 1970s a rising focus on MCs and the stunning  
 36 popularity of "Rapper's Delight" would serve to cement a new hierarchy  
 37 among the genre's practitioners, not to mention a shift in the sites of hip-  
 38 hop production from parks and clubs to studios and mass media. Hip-hop  
 39 would change irrevocably after the advent of rap records, especially as a  
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next generation of kids striving to be fresh and cool embraced the new possibilities for hip-hop performance afforded by studios, live musicians and drum machines, and, eventually, digital samples of the very breakbeats that so reliably excited dancers at the seminal parties thrown by the likes of Herc, Bambaataa, and Flash. Perhaps more radically, commercial hip-hop recordings, circulating far and wide, would enable the genre to transcend its local context, making these new and exhilarating forms available to a diverse range of new devotees, not all of whom shared the orientation produced by such a high-pressure cultural crucible as the Bronx. The compelling aesthetic innovations of hip-hop's founding figures would inspire countless variations in the ensuing decades, addressing and inviting new participants into an increasingly translocal and mass-mediated youth culture. A great deal of this subsequent activity remained grassroots, amateur, local, and independent, but new industrial partners from corporate record labels to Hollywood studios would follow. A dynamic, if occasionally tense, feedback loop between small-scale and corporate enterprise has animated hip-hop aesthetics ever since.

**The Golden Age: Commercial Inroads and the Rise of Gangsta (1980–1989)**

On the heels of “Rapper’s Delight,” Sugar Hill Records and other small New York-based labels, such as Tommy Boy, Profile, and Wild Pitch, sought to capitalize on the growing interest in rap. These efforts would bring hip-hop to far wider attention, disseminating while reshaping its distinctive aesthetics. In the first half of the 1980s, hip-hop enjoyed an increasing presence in mass media, appearing in documentary reportage on such novel forms as “breakdance” (an outsider term for b-boying) and graffiti as well as in such stylized films as *Breakin’* (1984) and *Beat Street* (1984). These mainstreaming trends would continue through the latter half of the decade as hip-hop developed into a commercial force, epitomized by the “crossover” success of Run DMC and other acts on Def Jam Records. Regional variations on the genre, especially those issuing from Los Angeles, reconfigured hip-hop’s geography and, in the rise of gangsta rap, its very ethos. All the while, hip-hop persisted and spread as grassroots participatory culture, taking root in cities across the United States—and with slightly more lag, the world—where the genre’s insurgent energy produced an efflorescence of do-it-yourself (DIY) recording artists, labels, and party promoters.

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1 Almost immediately, the shift to a recorded medium produced stark  
 2 changes for hip-hop form and content. Born in the parks and community  
 3 centers of the Bronx, hip-hop fashion had long mixed streetwise style  
 4 with an aspirational and occasionally exotic touch. New commercial vistas  
 5 ushered in a sartorial regime that took even stronger cues from showbiz.  
 6 On record sleeves, at higher profile concerts, and, before long, in music  
 7 videos, hip-hop's most prominent performers—e.g., Flash and Bambaataa  
 8 and their extended crews, the Furious Five, and Soul Sonic Force—styled  
 9 themselves in garish garb that seemed at once post-apocalyptic, Afro-  
 10 futuristic, and downright campy. This line of experimentation also  
 11 informed new studio productions. To refigure their acts from live stage to  
 12 studio, Bambaataa, Flash, and other early hip-hop recording artists took  
 13 care to produce their tracks according to hip-hop's aesthetic priorities  
 14 even as they embraced new possibilities afforded by state-of-the-art studio  
 15 equipment and knowledgeable engineers and producers from other sectors  
 16 of the dance music world, such as Arthur Baker, who collaborated  
 17 with Afrika Bambaataa on his breakthrough single “Planet Rock” (1982).  
 18 Together with Grandmaster Flash's “The Message,” also released in 1982,  
 19 “Planet Rock” pointed at once to hip-hop's past and its future. A brief  
 20 consideration of these two early hip-hop hits reveals how the sound and  
 21 purview of the genre were shifting, even as certain crucial elements  
 22 remained firmly in place.

23 On both “Planet Rock” and “The Message,” hip-hop's central sonic  
 24 signposts—funk-derived rhythms, foregrounded drums, palpable bass,  
 25 and musical allusions to contemporary and perennial favorites—sit along-  
 26 side bracingly new sounds like the orchestral bursts of a digital sampling  
 27 keyboard, the sustained bass decay of a synthesized kick drum, or vocal  
 28 effects that make rappers sound like robots. In place of cherished break-  
 29 beats coaxed from well-worn vinyl or a studio band replaying loops  
 30 inspired by DJs' live edits of popular tracks (as heard on “Rapper's  
 31 Delight”), “Planet Rock” and “The Message” feature funky rhythms pro-  
 32 grammed using the drum machines of the day. An up-tempo track (close  
 33 to 130 beats per minute) and thus well suited for dancing, “Planet Rock”  
 34 brims with the electronic sounds of the latest in synthesizer technology, a  
 35 quintessential example of what some have called electro-funk—a niche  
 36 that Tommy Boy Records was eager to exploit. High-tech sheen aside, it  
 37 also bears the hallmarks of old school hip-hop. Ensemble party raps,  
 S38 including call-and-response chants, alternate with a haunting melody bor-  
 R39 rowed from a seemingly unlikely source: “Trans-Europe Express,” a 1977  
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dance hit by Kraftwerk, a German electronic music outfit who, despite their robotic rhythms and cold synthesizers, enjoyed a remarkable following in African American club scenes and had long held a special place in Bambaataa's eclectic record collection. For all its futuristic departures, then, "Planet Rock" was firmly anchored in the specific aesthetics developed by Bronx DJs in the 1970s.

For its part, "The Message," another rather contrived but ironically seminal production from Sugar Hill Records, also presented continuities with earlier practices even as it engendered a bold new trend for hip-hop. Though it shared a funky rhythmic framework with hip-hop's favorite breakbeats, at 100 beats per minute, the track was far slower than the driving soul and disco beats that had long been hip-hop's bread and butter. Indeed, Grandmaster Flash and his group were so dismayed by the plodding tempo that they rejected the project and declined to participate, intent on making a party track. Only one of Flash's MCs, Melvin "Melle Mel" Glover, agreed to work on the song, contributing his vocals and a final verse. The rest of the production, including the eerie synthesizer lines, features the work of Clifton "Jiggs" Chase, Sugar Hill's in-house producer and arranger, and Edward Fletcher, a.k.a. Duke Bootee, another musician and songwriter at the label. Fletcher composed and performed the chorus and opening verses, which offer vivid ruminations on the psychological tolls of urban blight. (Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five would remain the artists named on the record, though publishing credits went to Fletcher, Glover, Chase, and Silvia Robinson.) The song's strong narrative structure offered a clear contrast to hip-hop's more typically party-centric lyrics. Its immediate resonance—climbing to number four on the R&B charts—made an indelible impression on the fledgling hip-hop industry, and on public perceptions of the genre itself. Injecting a certain gravitas into hip-hop's festivities, "The Message" refashioned the genre as specially positioned to offer timely commentary on black urban life. While up-tempo party raps have never receded from hip-hop, gritty tales about the ills of urban poverty, delivered over a brooding soundtrack, have come to occupy a dominant place in the genre. In one stroke, the song sowed the seeds of activist "conscious rap" as well as gangsta rap's vivid depictions of street violence.

Hip-hop's biggest commercial breakthrough to that point, the cross-over triumph of Run DMC and Def Jam Records, follows clearly and closely on these developments. A trio hailing from Queens comprising two MCs and a DJ, Run DMC's mix of big synthetic drums, hard rock

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guitars, commanding voices, and spartan but striking street fashion (black leather, gold chains, fedoras, and crisp Adidas sneakers) grabbed the attention of hip-hop's core New York audience and then, in an unprecedented manner, the national mainstream. Making party music with a realist edge, Run DMC deftly mixed social commentary, catchy refrains, and bravado. But what propelled the trio into uncharted territory for hip-hop—into the top five of the Billboard Hot 100, regular rotation on MTV, and multiplatinum album sales—was the savvy choice on the part of their producer, Rick Rubin, to fuse their brash vocals and booming beats with the squealing electric guitars still dominating the pop-rock landscape. The formula proved popular on the trio's tellingly titled second album, *King of Rock* (1985), and then enormously successful with the group's remake of Aerosmith's "Walk This Way" for their third album, *Raising Hell* (1986). An admirer of hard rock and hip-hop alike, Rubin was poised to broker this marriage, though it is telling that hip-hop DJs had long reserved a special place in their crates for "Walk This Way" (originally released in 1975), thanks to its stark opening drum break. Hence, Def Jam's lucrative merger of rap and rock was itself presaged by the eumenical selections of early hip-hop DJs, cued into the magic of such moments, it bears repeating, by discerning dancers.

Hip-hop acts and labels made sustained commercial inroads during the latter half of the 1980s. Joining Def Jam, Sugar Hill, Tommy Boy, and other established labels were a rash of independent ventures increasingly based outside New York, such as LA's Priority Records or Delicious Vinyl, often operating as subsidiaries of the majors or with national distribution deals. The relentless and competitive release of rap records made hip-hop aesthetics more widely available while at the same time reshaping the sound of hip-hop through inevitable regional variation. Thanks to the reach of rap records and increasing dissemination via radio and television, scenes were springing up across the country, from Boston to Houston, where aspiring artists and enterprising promoters formed groups, recorded demos and organized shows, distributed small-batch releases via local shops and directly out of their cars, courted local radio play, built a hometown fan base, and so on. Hip-hop's privileging of immediacy and participation over polish, together with the advent of more affordable and sophisticated music production equipment, fostered a cottage industry of home recordings, small-label ventures, and thriving local media ecologies. This DIY spirit and local orientation also gave rise in the mid-1980s to the mixtape, a cassette featuring a local DJ's mix of the latest rap songs,

often mixing regional and national acts and typically for sale in informal commercial settings like sidewalk stands and swap meets. In contrast to the tapes that circulated in the seventies, capturing a DJ's live set in low-fidelity, mixtapes were more often assembled carefully at home or in a studio, sometimes using a multitrack recorder, and they were conceived as commercial products in their own right. As rap records were treated as malleable materials, not unlike breakbeats before them, mixtapes served to extend the practice of editing and activating recordings for particular listening contexts.

Another mid-eighties extension of seventies DJ practice, and a crucial development for hip-hop (and modern music production writ large), is the embrace of sampling as primary compositional technique. As noted, the first rap recordings departed radically from hip-hop tradition by replacing the DJ's real-time manipulation of breakbeats with studio reproductions performed by in-house musicians or programmed into synthesizers and drum machines. The result was a certain loss of aura and meaning as a central feature of hip-hop's affective charge—namely, the use of particular timbres from beloved performances to jog the musical memory—receded from the sound of the genre. With the advent of relatively affordable digital samplers such as the SP-1200 or the MPC, however, sampling offered a way to bring breakbeats and all manner of resonant audio fragments back into the mix. The aesthetic parameters forged in the feedback loops of Bronx dance parties thus returned resurgent, powerfully informing sampling practice in terms of form and content alike: source material remained ecumenical but grounded in funky percussion; drums and bass routinely pushed to thrilling, palpable effect. Although hip-hop producers were not the first to employ the procedure, they quickly became sampling's foremost practitioners and innovators—with regard both to subtle details (such as the ways drum breaks were chopped up, processed, and reassembled) and to densely layered, unprecedented, album-length masterpieces (e.g., the work of Public Enemy's Bomb Squad). Prior to Marley Marl's famous epiphany upon discovering he could isolate and manipulate a single snare drum from a classic James Brown record (Rose 1994, 79), no one had attempted such a brazen and integral appropriation of commercial recordings. Looping and chopping up hip-hop's beloved breakbeats soon became not only commonplace, but for many artists and devotees, absolutely paramount to the genre's sound, feel, and philosophy—a position redoubled in the wake of prominent copyright infringement litigation (Schloss 2004; Marshall 2006).

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As with the mixtape, the art of sampling revived and reinvigorated hip-hop's radical approach to musical commodities as the phenomenon transitioned from live, local practice to a more mediated experience. Treating the audio recording not merely as a consumer end product but as a creative resource served to decommodify it (even if to be recommodified later), an approach consonant both with timeless cultural traditions of reuse and allusion and with the utterly modern (and largely academic and avant-garde) techniques of *musique concrète*.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, obviating the need for a band or "professional" musicians, sampling represented yet another way that hip-hop aesthetics fostered a democratization of popular culture. Suddenly, anyone with access to the equipment and an ear for arrangement could be a composer. This legacy remains important and immense. Today's popular plug-and-play music software (e.g., GarageBand or FruityLoops), which has itself initiated another phase of popular music's democratization and disintermediation, takes for granted the centrality of hip-hop's once pioneering approach to contemporary musical play and production. If once the product of a leap in logic and a lot of labor, sample-based loops have today become the default option for music production. But not only did sampling extend hip-hop's powerful and democratic aesthetic, as an approach grounded in the specific affective resonances and amplified frequencies of particular recordings, it also enabled a suggestive and referential sonic language that added a vivid dimension to hip-hop's cultural politics. Directly figurative samples—conjuring everything from familiar funk to modern jazz, dangerous dancehall to childhood schmaltz—could colorfully support a growing range of expressive styles, rhetorical positions, and archetypes employed by rap vocalists (some of whom still styled themselves as MCs).

Some pivotal examples stand out among the new figurations brought into being in the late eighties by savvy acts of sampling. One is *Criminal Minded* (1987) by Boogie Down Productions (BDP), released on B-Boy Records, the group's own modest imprint (supported by a small, South Bronx label called Rock Candy). At the same time that Run DMC were enjoying platinum record sales with their fusion of hard rock and reverberant drum machines, BDP refashioned the sound of hip-hop by delivering Jamaican patois-laced lyrics about the ravages of the crack age over choppy, distorted, and stark backing tracks that beckoned from the bleeding edge of audio culture. Jarringly truncated samples—drums from James Brown breaks, a guitar riff from a reggae instrumental—explode over a timeline held in place by hi-hats so quantized they possess a sort of

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anti-swing. As familiar as it sounded in some ways, it still sounded like nothing else. And if KRS-One's street-level realism takes inevitable cues from "The Message," the narrator of "P Is Free" and "9mm Goes Bang" is a very different character, less a wary observer or victim and more an eager participant, a ready reaper of dubious Reagan-era spoils. *Criminal Minded* signaled a strong tonal shift in hip-hop's representation of urban malaise and its effects on community relationships, and the album's first-person badman perspective—informed and inflected by dancehall reggae's mirror images of black, modern gangsters—helped to kick-start the "gangsta" rap movement. Notably, it also recentered the Bronx in the hip-hop imagination, at least temporarily, even as it reaccented the birthplace of hip-hop so strongly that it was difficult to imagine Kool Herc hiding his Jamaican accent a decade earlier.

A more infamous touchstone of gangsta rap, *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) by Los Angeles-based NWA, refashioned the emergent subgenre by drawing on the spectacular sheen of Hollywood. Taking their sartorial cue from Run DMC, NWA adopted a striking but muted look to suit their theatrical menace: black jeans, LA sports gear, dark sunglasses. The group's producer, Andre "Dr. Dre" Young, propelled their gangsta imagery using a battery of samples: loping funk bass lines, explosive breakbeats (sometimes layered for effect, and usually looped rather than reassembled from fragments), dialogue from vintage cop-and-robber films, wailing sirens and other effects, including, in a true nod to Hollywood, the Foley-style sounds of running, fighting, and, of course, gunshots. Styling themselves as cool but crazed, NWA marshaled as they modernized the exaggerated, profanity-laced boasts of African American oral, literary, and audio traditions, and they courted controversy and publicity with songs such as "Fuck the Police" (which led the FBI to send a letter of concern to Priority Records, the distributor for NWA's label, Ruthless Records). At a moment when gang violence was becoming a national preoccupation, NWA gave voice to a popular dissatisfaction with the circumstances of inner-city life, in particular police brutality and other forms of pervasive racism, cannily foreshadowing the 1992 LA uprising, despite notes of nihilism. ("When something happens in South Central Los Angeles," intones Ice Cube during the first seconds of the album's eponymous song, "nothing happens; it's just another nigger dead.") Gangsta theater emerges here as complex and compelling racial politics, taking cues from badman archetypes and mobster flicks alike. The mix of cartoonish violence and self-proclaimed realism made for an intoxicating but toxic cocktail, a feedback loop through

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1 which hip-hop's sense of "the real" would be reconfigured by gangsta rap's  
 2 surreal and salacious media spectacle.

3 Even as it became an increasingly big tent, full of funhouse mirrors,  
 4 hip-hop remained a small enough world in the late eighties that an act like  
 5 NWA could go on national tour with Long Island's De La Soul without  
 6 too much cognitive dissonance. In contrast to NWA's black garb and noir  
 7 sensibilities, De La Soul proposed a more playful racial politics through  
 8 day-glo colors, Africa-shaped medallions and peace signs, and sample-  
 9 based backings that whimsically recycled pop detritus. Along with such  
 10 affiliates as the Jungle Brothers and A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul  
 11 opened up space in hip-hop for positive, practically bohemian depictions  
 12 of black middle-class life that aligned with Afrocentrism while resisting  
 13 the strictures of archetype and stereotype. (It is telling that NWA and De  
 14 La Soul could tour together on the strength of rather different hit singles  
 15 centered on self-expression, "Express Yourself" and "Me, Myself, and I.")  
 16 Together with other sample-laden acts from greater New York—many,  
 17 notably, hailing from Long Island's middle-class black enclaves—these  
 18 groups helped to rearticulate, against the rise of gangsta, hip-hop's con-  
 19 ception of black community. Perhaps none would do so as forcefully, and  
 20 with so avant-garde a sonic backdrop, as Public Enemy. On formative  
 21 albums such as *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988) and  
 22 *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990), Public Enemy put forward a bracing cri-  
 23 tique of racial injustice over a barrage of densely layered samples. For many  
 24 listeners, the group's noisy militancy seemed less a contrast than a com-  
 25 plement to NWA's strident, street-level drama, and all of this activity  
 26 amounted to a sea change for the genre's wider representation and reso-  
 27 nance (not least because of both groups' ability to captivate mainstream  
 28 media). On several occasions in the late eighties, Public Enemy's frontman,  
 29 Chuck D, compared rap music to CNN, or to TV news more broadly, for  
 30 hip-hop's commercial success and growing diversity allowed an unprece-  
 31 dented set of depictions of the everyday concerns, struggles, and fantasies  
 32 of African Americans to circulate publicly.

33 Ironically, even as sampling advanced the art of hip-hop production  
 34 and offered vivid backdrop for new acts, the effect of these successful  
 35 "sampladelic" records (to invoke an awkward term used seriously by music  
 36 critics<sup>2</sup>) was to accelerate a longstanding trend: the ascension of the  
 37 rapper—formerly a master-of-ceremonies assisting a DJ and interacting  
 S38 with a live audience of dancers—to primary and sometimes sole focus.  
 R39 This shift (which had long transpired in Jamaica) was already underway by  
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the late seventies as Herc, Flash, and Bambaataa—who yet retained top billing—increasingly integrated MCs and vocal groups into their live acts. The ascent of rap recordings served to cement this hierarchy, minimizing the DJ’s role, if not effacing it altogether. Popular nomenclature provides a guide here, for *hip-hop*—a broad term encompassing styles of dance, dress, visual art, and other practices—was overshadowed at this time by *rap*. The popularity of music videos no doubt played a paramount role in this shift as well, framing rappers as actors; the two biggest shows were tellingly named *Rap City* and *Yo! MTV Raps*. As hip-hop further integrated with the mainstream music business, the most successful rappers functioned as rock stars, transcending their vocations as performers to serve in the wider culture as celebrities. This represented another phase of refashioning for hip-hop, from recorded form to full-fledged media phenomenon, allowing its commercial possibilities—as well as its shapes and sites—to multiply.

Between the growing investment by artists in fashioning their personas (as much as, say, their lyrics) and by labels, magazines, television, radio, and other media in promoting rap as pop spectacle, hip-hop’s power to inform young people’s own processes of self-fashioning had never been more freighted with possibility and danger. Although early DJs and MCs took on honorific titles, donned outlandish costumes, and no doubt seemed larger than life to some, hip-hop as a local, live practice constrained one’s ability to invent a character too out of step with one’s rep. To put it another way, cultural norms restricted the distance between one’s character and one’s personality. The move to studios, however, invited all manner of experimentation, and the mediation of audio and video offered safe distance to play with *dramatis personae*. This shift was profound but subtle enough that rappers continued to collapse their recording selves and their actual selves—all the better for imbuing performances with authenticity, that slippery coin of the realm. As an artist who began in the late 1980s by styling himself as a sly-tongued, mildly Afrocentric Brooklynite (which he was), found success in the late 1990s posing as a former drug hustler among the best rappers “in the game” (which he was), and spent the last decade as a part-time executive, part-time pop star, and part-time art collector (all of which he is)—or in his own words, “not a businessman” but “a business, man”—Jay-Z knows this open secret as well as anyone. In his recent book, *Decoded*, bearing the apt cover image of one of Warhol’s Rorschach paintings (which he owns), Jay-Z minces no words: “The rapper’s character is essentially a

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conceit, a first-person literary creation” (2010, 292). But he notes that artists themselves can forget this:

You can be anyone in the [recording] booth. It’s like wearing a mask. It’s an amazing freedom but also a temptation. The temptation is to go too far, to pretend the mask is real and try to convince people that you’re something that you’re not. (292)

Despite this widely recognized practice, then, the sly elision of the rap persona and the person doing the rapping has made hip-hop in the age of its technological reproducibility a powerful but problematic resource for young people of all stripes and, given the ascendance of glossy gangsta theater, for young black men in particular.

### The Platinum Age: Pop Integration and Cooptation (1990–2005)

Over the course of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, hip-hop maintained an impressive trajectory into nearly every corner of popular culture and all manner of commerce. Beyond placing hits on the pop charts and in television, film, and advertising, hip-hop aesthetics more generally influenced nearly every other popular genre, including rock and country but especially R&B, which has increasingly blurred into hip-hop. As such, the transmitted if transfigured sonic priorities of 1970s Bronx DJs now suffused popular culture as thoroughly as jazz and rock had in earlier decades. During this period, hip-hop was refashioned by a host of entrepreneurial efforts into a broad sort of brand, a cultural and economic force that could bring to market more than musical commodities: from clothing lines and other lifestyle products, to magazines and straight-to-DVD videos, to the public relations revolution embodied by the “street teams” that began by promoting new recordings and quickly branched out into any conceivable urban product pitch. Although such commercial success sometimes entailed embarrassing collusion with corporate visions, in more independent sectors, such as the burgeoning regional industries in southern cities like Atlanta and New Orleans, hip-hop’s rising tide enabled a fair amount of artistic and economic autonomy. As the tools of professional-grade production and global distribution became ever more affordable, a staggering amount of hip-hop production ensued. From major labels to independents of varying scale to self-released or noncommercial efforts, hip-hop remained a remarkable culture engine. In turn, this rash of activity

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propelled a continued expansion of settings and styles (not to mention a perennial revival of old school and golden age practices), which extended not only across the United States but, especially with the Bob Marley-like resonance of Tupac Shakur, to every corner of the globe.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, while it would be wrong to downplay this dazzling diversity, despite subtle shifts in the genre's textures and timbres, the formal innovations of the 1980s as pertaining to musical form, thematic content, and media strategy remained pretty much in place: recycled funk rhythms were enhanced with the latest in digital studio trickery; audio recordings supported by videos remained the primary product; and an array of self-styled macks, hustlers, gangstas, and players refused to relinquish their dominant grip on the genre. With greater access to resources than ever, hip-hop became blinged-out (as the soundtrack for conspicuous consumption) and pimped-out (knowingly, in a "pimp the system," "pimp myself," "pimp my ride" manner). From a certain perspective, hip-hop's imperatives during this phase might be reduced to two key positions: (1) an individualist aspiration for the good life; and (2) the work ethic, or grind, to make it a reality. But against a certain decadence, hip-hop's popularity and aggressive transmedia practices served to spread other core ideas of hip-hop as well, among them some that would not have seemed too out of place in the Bronx decades before: resourceful repurposing (of ideas, styles, technologies), community commitments, technical mastery, and carefully crafted performances that come across as effortlessly cool.

Marking the genre's turn toward full-scale pop integration, two of hip-hop's biggest commercial breakthroughs arrived in 1990, inevitable if perhaps regrettable outcomes of the genre's mainstreaming trend. Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby" and MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This" were massive hits, propelling both artists' albums to multiplatinum status (i.e., millions of units sold) and occupying pop radio playlists for months. Notably, both employed long samples from previous pop hits (and both were sued for unauthorized use), and each in its own way seemed to illustrate an inherent tension between hip-hop's assumed street authenticity and the commercial circulation that made it available to all. Whereas MC Hammer actually hailed from rough-and-tumble Oakland despite embracing ridiculous parachute pants and shimmying across stages like a showbiz veteran, Vanilla Ice masqueraded as an urban tough from Miami despite hailing from Texas. Mainstream audiences swallowed these confections whole, but vocal quarters of the hip-hop industry—including artists and burgeoning media outlets (especially magazines)—expressed strong dissatisfaction with both

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1 acts, increasingly ambivalent about the aesthetic and political costs of cross-  
 2 over success. This anticommercial resentment was further stoked by the  
 3 ways commercial success had begun to reshape hip-hop aesthetics as a  
 4 matter of economic course, at times impinging on beloved traditions.  
 5 Following a series of high-profile copyright lawsuits and settlements in the  
 6 early nineties, for instance, sample-based hip-hop producers adopted a  
 7 marked hesitancy on the one hand and a certain militancy on the other.  
 8 Some, such as DJ Premier of Gang Starr, craftily upheld sampling as central  
 9 to his and to “real” hip-hop aesthetics, obscuring his sources while flaunting  
 10 their sampled-ness; others simply embraced synthesizers, live instruments,  
 11 and, when affordable, legally licensed samples. The result was a two-tier  
 12 system for the genre: the mainstream or “commercial” sphere, flush with  
 13 cash and in-house access to sample-rich back catalogs, and the so-called  
 14 underground, a term expressing at once an aesthetic stance and economic  
 15 marginality.

16 It is hardly surprising that two of the genre’s most successful labels in  
 17 the 1990s bridged the gap, at least aesthetically, between the underground  
 18 and mainstream. If hip-hop had been trending toward full-blown media  
 19 spectacle since the late 1980s, the famous and fatal feud between Bad Boy  
 20 and Death Row Records made good on this promise. Had the two labels  
 21 not so effectively threaded the needle between hardcore and commercial  
 22 aesthetics, it seems unlikely that magazines such as *The Source* or *Vibe*  
 23 would have cared enough to throw fuel on the fiery exchange that devel-  
 24 oped mid-decade between the two labels’ biggest stars, Tupac Shakur  
 25 (a.k.a. 2Pac) and the Notorious B.I.G. (or Biggie Smalls). Run by the  
 26 thuggish Marion “Suge” Knight, who brokered Dr. Dre’s departure from  
 27 Ruthless Records, Death Row established a national profile first with the  
 28 massive success of Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic* (1992), which served to intro-  
 29 duce Snoop Dogg (Calvin Broadus Jr.), soon to be a star in his own right,  
 30 as well as the “G-Funk” sound, a new take on the gangsta aesthetic Dre  
 31 developed with NWA. Suturing the slinky funk of seventies groups like  
 32 Parliament-Funkadelic (or P-Funk) to steroidal drums, Dre provided  
 33 enthralling backing for menacing raps about gun violence, drug use,  
 34 misogyny, and revenge fantasies. With Snoop’s *Doggystyle* arriving months  
 35 later (1993) and outselling *The Chronic*, it was clear that they were on to  
 36 something (namely, that the suburbs could not get enough gangsta story-  
 37 telling). By this point, the aesthetic and geographic center of hip-hop had  
 S38 decisively shifted to Los Angeles. But around the same time, almost in  
 R39 response—at least it would be heard and dramatized that way—Sean  
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“Puffy” Combs challenged this realigned cartography. Launching Bad Boy Records in 1993, Combs began producing a string of hardcore New York rappers and R&B groups, imbuing his acts with a signature sound that harkened back to New York’s golden past—in part, by employing the sort of dusty breakbeats that still resonated as intimately part of hip-hop—without sacrificing a contemporary sheen. Combs introduced Biggie Smalls on a series of remixes, including a popular version of Craig Mack’s “Flava in Ya Ear” (1993), Bad Boy’s first release. When Smalls’s debut album, <i>Ready to Die</i> (1994), followed a year later to multiplatinum sales, Puffy and Biggie found themselves presiding over a New York rap renaissance alongside such kindred acts as Nas, Jay-Z, and the Wu-Tang Clan.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
Although initially friendly, Biggie and Tupac grew increasingly estranged and antagonistic after public disputes between Suge Knight and Sean Combs, and their recorded and press-released taunts escalated a war of words to a heightened pitch. By 1996, Tupac had become Death Row’s flagship act, enjoying idol-like popularity effaced perhaps only by his posthumous legend. His story uncannily embodies hip-hop’s narrative arc: the product of Black Panther parents and art school, Tupac starts his career as a roadie and dancer for the Bay Area’s quirky party-rap group Digital Underground; he makes his solo debut rapping about incarceration, police brutality, and teenage pregnancy ( <i>2Pacalypse Now</i> , 1991), and spends the next few years recording increasingly paranoid and nihilistic material along with occasional anthems of compassionate uplift (e.g., “Keep Ya Head Up” [1993] and “Dear Mama” [1995]); after several brushes with the law, bailed out by Suge Knight, Tupac signs to Death Row and embraces the unabashed “thug life” to stunning commercial success ( <i>All Eyez on Me</i> , 1996). Jailed repeatedly and nearly killed in a November 1994 shooting in New York, Tupac’s vivid gangsta theater had long blurred into his real life. Biggie, similarly, appeared eager to prophesy his end with albums titled <i>Ready to Die</i> and <i>Life After Death</i> (released two weeks after his murder in March 1997). As if to prove wrong the critics who claimed gangsta was just “theater,” life would soon imitate art. Both artists were killed in drive-by shootings, a mere six months apart. Judged as media spectacle, this was as good as show business gets—better even, given the tragic conflation of the real and “the real.” As such, Tupac’s and Biggie’s duel-to-the-death offered a sort of apex, or rather nadir, in the trend toward highly profitable, media-stoked animus, or “beef,” between rival rap stars. (On the other hand, the posthumous cottage industries grown up around both figures can reach lows of their own.)	12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38S 39R 40L

1 Against the backdrop of nearly unchecked commercial ascent and tragic  
 2 thematic theater, a groundswell of independent production and distribu-  
 3 tion continued from Brooklyn to Oakland, Atlanta to Houston. A number  
 4 of enterprising producer-rapper-entrepreneurs, perhaps none as singularly  
 5 successful as New Orleans's Master P, sold millions of CDs "out of their  
 6 cars" (literally and figuratively). Their small business practices, already  
 7 grounded in two decades of DIY hustle, would lay a foundation for the  
 8 coming age of Internet-abetted disintermediation. Moreover, advancing  
 9 both "anticommercial" and fully aspirational stances, these diverse efforts  
 10 offered a variety of alternative scripts to the gangsta ethos, as well as no  
 11 little variation on that well-worn theme. In the wake of the sad, sizeable  
 12 losses of Tupac and Biggie, Brooklyn-based duo Black Star reanimated the  
 13 sound and spirit of Boogie Down Productions for their song "Definition"  
 14 (1998). The group deployed samples and melodic allusions to two seminal  
 15 BDP songs—one a proto-gangsta celebration of violence ("Remix for P Is  
 16 Free"), the other diametrically opposed ("Stop the Violence")—in order  
 17 to propel an urgent critique of rhetorical and actual violence in hip-hop.  
 18 Black Star, dead prez, Common, the Roots, and other "socially conscious"  
 19 groups would thus emerge from hip-hop's aesthetic underground (with  
 20 commercial recording contracts) to inspire a generation of backpack-  
 21 toting, politically engaged formalists. But assailing "hater-players" from  
 22 the economic underground ultimately proved less popular than styling  
 23 oneself as a modern-day, media-savvy meta-pimp beset by phantom  
 24 "player-haters." Despite being bankrolled by James Murdoch, son of  
 25 Rupert, Black Star's label, Rawkus Records, could hardly compete with  
 26 the commercial juggernaut that was Bad Boy. An underground hit, com-  
 27 monly played in clubs and on hip-hop radio, "Definition" topped out at  
 28 number sixty on the Billboard Top 100. In contrast, in the months fol-  
 29 lowing Biggie Smalls's murder, Bad Boy commenced a chart-topping run,  
 30 including Combs's treacly tribute to B.I.G., "I'll Be Missing You," which  
 31 spent eleven weeks at number one in the summer of 1997. Hip-hop's (par-  
 32 tially willing) cooptation by the larger culture industry would continue  
 33 apace, even alongside steady expansion at all levels, with no end of new  
 34 avatars willing to step into the void left by the sudden departure of two of  
 35 the genre's most outsize characters.

36 In the first years of the new millennium, with hip-hop singles domi-  
 37 nating the charts, the genre essentially became coterminous with global  
 S38 youth culture. Thanks to steady commercial gains by hip-hop artists  
 R39 and labels, the Top 40 changed radically in character as teenyboppers—  
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teenagers, especially girls, still comprising the major market for pop recordings—abandoned boy bands for airbrushed thug balladeers. This was hardly a superficial shift; thanks to hip-hop, there were more black faces and voices in the mainstream than ever before. Not only did hip-hop acts consistently generate hits, as they had since the early nineties, now they downright dominated Billboard's pop charts. A widely reported milestone, during one week in October 2003 the Top 10 was entirely filled by black artists for the first time in history: nine of the ten were bonafide rap acts and the number one spot, "Baby Boy" by Beyoncé and Sean Paul, may as well have been (Lewis 2003). But despite this immense cultural footprint and sea change in the relationship between American popular culture and race, the main difference for hip-hop was a matter of scale. With regard to formal aesthetic features, little had changed since the mid-1980s. For instance, one of the genre's biggest stars of the last decade, Eminem, may merit special mention for the ways he refashioned whiteness through hip-hop (and refashioned hip-hop in the process), but his central schtick, a schizophrenic train wreck of person and persona, was simply an intensification of an approach developed in the early days of gangsta rap. Likewise, while 50 Cent deserves attention for his hefty record sales, incredibly profitable venture with Vitamin Water, and remarkable transmedia strategy—he even appears as the action hero of a video game, *Blood on the Sand* (2009), allowing players to indulge urban-guerilla fantasies of killing Middle Eastern terrorists with a gangsta flair—none of this is terribly new.

Given hip-hop's rise to the top, criticism of the genre remains rife from both sides of the political spectrum. On one hand, conservative African American commentators, such as John McWhorter and Thomas Chatterton Williams, follow in the footsteps of would-be censor C. Delores Tucker, arguing that hip-hop's lyrics and imagery demean women and African Americans and contribute to a deeply counterproductive culture enthralling black youth. An October 2010 op-ed by Williams in the *Wall Street Journal* levels this critique at hip-hop's biggest star in recent years, Lil Wayne, starting from the dismaying news that President Obama has some of the rapper's songs on his iPod:

Lil Wayne is emblematic of a hip-hop culture that is ignorant, misogynistic, casually criminal and often violent. A self-described gangster, a modern-day minstrel who embodies the most virulent racist stereotypes that generations of blacks have fought to overcome. His music

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1 is a vigorous endorsement of the pathologies that still haunt and  
2 cripple far too many in the black underclass.

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4 On the other hand, if not entirely in disagreement, critics from the left  
5 contend that if gangsta rap ever had any sort of political valence, even that  
6 seems to have evaporated in the face of unfettered commercial success.  
7 “Back in the days, gangsta rappers faced off against label executives in  
8 corporate boardrooms over freedom of speech,” notes Eric Arnold in  
9 *Colorlines*. “Now they entertain marketing meetings over energy drink  
10 endorsements” (2010). Still others, not surprisingly including many rap  
11 stars and so-called hip-hop moguls, view hip-hop’s accumulation of cap-  
12 ital and power as a revolutionary political project in line with Booker T.  
13 Washington’s ideas about African American self-determination (Simmons  
14 2002; Neal 2004).

15 As hip-hop, continually refashioned by practitioners and investors, has  
16 in turn reconfigured not only the music business but popular culture and  
17 commerce more broadly, one might legitimately wonder who has co-opted  
18 whom. Hip-hop artists and entrepreneurs may make compromises on the  
19 road to riches, but a certain insistence about the shapes and forms the  
20 genre takes—partly a product of stubborn artistic prerogatives, partly  
21 derived from a savvy grasp on which visions of blackness sell—has also  
22 radically changed the face and tone of American popular culture. Whether  
23 this change is for better or worse is up for debate, but to focus solely on  
24 the top sellers and stars is to overlook hip-hop’s profound reorganization  
25 of how popular culture is made and is made meaningful. Hip-hop’s  
26 platinum-plated reshaping of public culture has not only lined the pockets  
27 of a few lucky individuals, it has also initiated and sustained an explosion  
28 in local, amateur production, fostering a participatory turn in popular  
29 culture that, with the rise of the World Wide Web and social media, now  
30 appears as the norm. For community organizers, activists, educators, pol-  
31 icymakers, and stakeholders of all sorts seeking to engage and support  
32 black youth, this more humble, if still impressive, sphere of activity is a far  
33 better target than the personal shortcomings of celebrities.

### 34 35 **The Silicon Age: MP3s, Social Media, and** 36 **New Plasticity (2005–present)** 37

S38 If hip-hop’s fortunes rose from gold to platinum between 1985 and 2005,  
R39 such upward mobility seemed to plateau with the advent of MP3s and  
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socially networked media-sharing sites. While it should not be too surprising that hip-hop's profits would parallel those of the larger recording industry, it should not be too lamented either. The changing media landscape, especially the shift from top-down to peer-to-peer topographies, may threaten business as usual for the major record labels, but such informal, independent modes of production and distribution are hardly alien to hip-hop with its history of DIY practices, premium on innovation, and early adoption of new technologies. Of course, during its ascent to the pinnacle of music consumer culture, certain quarters of the hip-hop world—which is to say, record-label executives and the rare artists with fair contracts—benefitted from the same exploitative practices and artificial scarcities that propped up the recording industry at large. But more importantly, as a participatory culture that uses consumer goods as part of its set of tools and repertoires, another large swath of the hip-hop world—e.g., independent artists and the audiences that engage and sustain them—has been well poised to weather the radical disintermediation presented by what some have called the social web (or “Web 2.0,” reflecting the shift toward so-called user-generated content). The last decade offers a series of rather remarkable success stories in this regard, all of which point to new possibilities for understanding hip-hop's power as a positive, productive force in the lives of young people.

Hip-hop's irrepressible ability to be refashioned by the next generation comes into fine focus with the shift—or, one might argue, return—from hip-hop as primarily gathered around musical commodities to hip-hop as a set of forms and practices circulating more or less freely (on the Internet but offline, too, of course) in order to be activated in real time and real space. As a genre that long encouraged amateur practice communities and robust participation, grounded in the feedback loops of live interaction, hip-hop not only continues apace during a turbulent moment for popular media of all kinds, it has continued to expand its remit, drawing in more participants and greater variety than ever before. The driving factor behind this change is, of course, the digital turn—namely, the unprecedented availability of professional-grade audio and video production software together with the advent of Internet sites and services that provide free global publishing capacity. These developments allow hip-hop's already thriving “underground” to proceed with little need for record labels or other intermediaries. Accordingly, hip-hop aesthetics have shifted again under this new regime, permitting a less polished aesthetic to sit comfortably alongside utterly pristine pop (which hip-hop still is too, at

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the top). While other genres struggle to find footing in this brave new world, hip-hop's longstanding appreciation for relatively unvarnished expression has placed the genre at the cutting edge of contemporary popular culture. In contrast to the garish products that glisten from billboards and corporate mass media, a certain "fruityloopy" minimalism is the order of the day.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to locate hip-hop's "products," for a popular song or dance today might reside across dozens of YouTube videos rather than in some reified object available at a store (even if the iTunes store). This riles certain purists and Golden Age devotees of virtuosic formalism, but it also represents a return to hip-hop's "old school" roots—namely, the emphasis on local performance and interaction (as embodied by the recent resurgence of dance crazes), and the resourceful refashioning of commodities, technologies, media, fashion, and so on. Further, by allowing a greater diversity of voices to circulate publicly, the genre shows promising signs of loosening its well-worn strictures of keep-it-realism. Thousands of everyday producers and participants, who make hip-hop a crucial part of their media-suffused lives, have already strongly refashioned hip-hop in their image, including rather direct challenges to longstanding mores around black masculinity. How could they do any less?

Although no hard line exists, one might as well pick 2005 as marking an epochal shift, for that is the year YouTube launched. The popular video-sharing website exemplifies a deep change in our mode of popular culture production. In some cases, YouTube has become the primary, if not sole, platform not just for musical artifacts but for social lives. Essentially the world's second most popular search engine and an absolutely immense site (serving, at last count, some three billion videos per day, with forty-eight hours of material uploaded each minute), YouTube has become a crucial platform for major acts and bedroom loners alike.<sup>5</sup> A great deal of hip-hop on YouTube embodies the phenomenon set in motion in the Bronx some forty years ago: that is, hip-hop remains as vibrant a grassroots phenomenon as ever. A profusion of self-produced songs and videos reside on YouTube, many with no commercial aspirations but, rather, simply uploaded for local peers (if circulating publicly, by default, and hence available globally). A staggering variety of other forms of hip-hop practice also thrive on the site: countless dance-alongs, rap-alongs, freestyle battles, remixes and mashups, and all manner of tutorials and demonstrations. On the other hand, hip-hop's outsize presence on YouTube also shows it to be as industrial as ever: half of the top twenty



most viewed videos all time, at the time of writing, are either hip-hop songs or clearly bear the marks of hip-hop's broader cultural influence. *Industry* is a key term when discussing YouTube as a central hip-hop site, for while the recording industry does its best to "monetize" its wares there, a broader sort of industry—a decentralized industriousness on the part of media-savvy young people—is also on full display, with significant consequences.

It is worth noting that as a distribution platform, YouTube emerges somewhat seamlessly from the genealogy of the so-called mixtape—long divorced, despite the name, from cassette technology as well as DJ-style mixing. Over the last decade, the mixtape has emerged as one of hip-hop's primary forms, a largely noncommercial method for projecting one's voice into a crowded public sphere. Major label artists and fully independent acts alike release mixtapes for a variety of reasons: to stoke anticipation and actual sales of official releases, to gain or maintain presence in a world of rapid turnover and fleeting attention spans, or simply to share via an imperative to produce and represent oneself as close to real time as possible. Initially a way for DJs to establish their brand and for audiences to keep up on the latest productions, mixtapes originated as semicommercial products, sold on the street, in the subway, or at barbershops and other nonconventional, informal retail sites—then subsequently duplicated and passed along hand to hand.<sup>6</sup> The rise of the MP3 mixtape, however, has exploded as it extends this practice, sidestepping commerce almost entirely as mixtapes circulate freely on websites like datpiff.com or via blogs, digital lockers (such as Mediafire and Hulkshare), and other peer-to-peer methods of exchange. This shift has also extended to the content of mixtapes, which have mutated from DJ vehicles to showcases for rappers to present original material with little or no assistance from traditional intermediaries. The impressive ascent of hip-hop stars like 50 Cent or, more recently, Lil Wayne and Drake stems directly from the aggressive and successful circulation of their mixtapes. But if this shift seems to parallel hip-hop's trajectory from DJ practice in the seventies to the rap recordings of the eighties, in other ways the shapes and forms of hip-hop in the age of MP3s and YouTube suggest an altogether different sort of configuration. Whereas one could argue that hip-hop resided in the parks of the Bronx in the seventies and in the personal media players—home and car stereos, boomboxes, and walkmen—of consumers in the eighties and nineties, hip-hop today might be said to reside on the distributed network of the World Wide Web and the devices through which people access and

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1 contribute to it. This is an important development with regard to notions  
 2 of industry and community. “Make no mistake,” argued hip-hop scribe  
 3 Andrew Noz in spring 2010, “the future of the genre lies not in the hands  
 4 of the industry, but at your corner bootlegger or favorite blog.”

5 Some of the most remarkable hip-hop success stories in this brave new  
 6 world reveal at once how new modes of production and circulation are  
 7 extending decades-old hip-hop traditions even as they present direct chal-  
 8 lenges to longstanding orthodoxies of the genre. Black youth have consis-  
 9 tently proven to be early adopters of new information and communication  
 10 technologies, and several savvy avatars of the so-called millennial genera-  
 11 tion have marshaled their familiarity with the digital domain into sub-  
 12 stantial followings and, in some cases, considerable commercial success.<sup>7</sup>  
 13 Perhaps the most notorious example is “Crank That (Soulja Boy)” (2007)  
 14 by DeAndre “Soulja Boy” Way, who self-produced and self-published the  
 15 song as a seventeen-year-old. Building the track out of stock sounds from  
 16 the popular and user-friendly music software FL Studio (formerly  
 17 FruityLoops), Soulja Boy deployed chintzy steel drum samples and stark  
 18 percussive accompaniment (synthesized snaps and hi-hats) to propel a  
 19 catchy refrain, which, as a clever branding strategy, prominently includes  
 20 his name. Sharing the MP3 with online peers on sites such as Soundclick  
 21 and MySpace, Soulja Boy found that it enjoyed remarkable resonance as  
 22 peers and supporters uploaded videos of themselves dancing to the song  
 23 using a set of simple steps choreographed by his friends. In turn, Soulja  
 24 Boy celebrated and encouraged such activity by embedding the videos on  
 25 his increasingly trafficked MySpace blog. The song and dance became a  
 26 “viral” hit on YouTube, inspiring hundreds to try out the steps and share  
 27 them with the world (and to remix the song in myriad ways), eventually  
 28 bringing Soulja Boy to the attention of Atlanta-based producer Mr.  
 29 Collipark, who signed him to a deal with Universal. This resulted in a  
 30 higher fidelity version of the song as well as an official video, which helped  
 31 to propel “Crank That” to the top of the charts, where it stayed for seven  
 32 weeks in late 2007. “Crank That” went on to set new records for digital  
 33 song sales as well as ringtones. Today Soulja Boy leverages substantial fol-  
 34 lowings on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to promote a constant flurry  
 35 of free mixtapes and commercial releases, including collaborations with  
 36 such established acts as 50 Cent. At the same time, Soulja Boy’s popu-  
 37 larity has also made him the target of hip-hop stakeholders who bemoan  
 S38 this “participatory turn” for the genre. Veteran rapper Ice T (today better  
 R39 known as a television actor), for instance, famously accused Soulja Boy of  
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“single-handedly kill[ing] hip-hop,” a sentiment shared widely—just see the dissenting comments on “Crank That” videos—but also one that underlines a generational shift with regard to what hip-hop should look and sound like.

Writing about Soulja Boy for the *New York Times*, Jon Caramanica (2010) registers this change: “His brand of low-barrier-to-entry rap has become the template for a new generation of teenage artists using the Internet as their primary promotion tool, creating rabid fan bases outside of usual industry structures.” There may be no artist who better exemplifies this shift than the Bay Area’s Lil B (a.k.a. Brandon McCartney), who seems to approach hip-hop in the age of social media more as a conceptual artist than a recording artist. For one, nearly everything he releases is available for free. A prolific producer of his own songs, Lil B has released somewhere in the range of 3,000 tracks over the last three years, some 700 of them via 150 separate MySpace accounts (Noz 2011). His quirky videos on YouTube garner millions of views and, perhaps more impressively, recruit thousands of willing participants to help spread his odd gospel. Lil B’s dances and catch phrases are gleefully embraced and amplified by everyday fans, established rappers (Soulja Boy among them), and professional athletes, all of whom appear less as unwitting replicants of so-called viral memes than as active participants in the phenomenon—“friends” (in the MySpace/Facebook sense) and “followers” (in Twitter’s terminology) who are in on the jokes. While the actual content of his songs can range from dada-esque absurdity to bald misogyny, this seems less important to Lil B’s acolytes—and for understanding hip-hop’s latest incarnation—than his impressive abilities to navigate the new media landscape and manage his public relations to such popular support and critical acclaim.

An important complement to Soulja Boy’s and Lil B’s individual stories of Web 2.0 triumph is the more faceless Los Angeles hip-hop phenomenon known as jerkin. Although the scene did launch one local act, the New Boyz, into the national mainstream, jerkin is better appreciated in the story of hip-hop precisely because of its lack of stars. Centered around home-produced rap songs and dance videos—generally intended for high school friends but, because of the open default settings of YouTube, broadcast far and wide—the jerkin scene seemed to encourage participation as a matter of principle, keeping the barriers to entry relatively low. Video tutorials abound on YouTube for making jerkin-style beats or mastering the small, relatively simple repertory of jerkin dances, and while many of the

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1 DIY dance videos or songs could stand up to contemporary commercial  
 2 standards of quality (especially in the age of Soulja Boy), others bear the  
 3 unmistakable “watermarks” of unlicensed or demo software, showing a  
 4 clear preference for immediacy and immersion over polish or posterity.  
 5 Consistent with earlier moments in hip-hop fashion, jerkin style called for  
 6 a creative combination of relatively accessible consumer goods (at least for  
 7 middle-class kids): brightly colored, close-fitting pants or “skinny jeans”;  
 8 T-shirts, hats, and other accessories nodding nostalgically to cartoons and  
 9 other childhood icons; the latest in personal digital gadgetry. As such,  
 10 jerkin’s participatory ethos embodies many of hip-hop’s earliest priorities:  
 11 interacting in real time and real space, with an emphasis on fun; harnessing  
 12 competitive energy to express personal style; repurposing public space and  
 13 consumer-end media technologies. Moreover, jerkin represents one of  
 14 dozens of regional scenes gathered around distinctive, local takes on hip-  
 15 hop (which, in turn, travel translocally). From Compton to Harlem, Dallas  
 16 to Memphis, black youth have gathered around specific dances such as the  
 17 “Stanky Legg” or the “Dougie”—or turfing or krumping or bucking—all  
 18 of them essentially sharing the same spirit and set of core competencies. As  
 19 with “Crank That” or the New Boyz’ “You’re a Jerk,” the signature songs  
 20 animating so much of this activity are often approached as communal  
 21 resources—distributed assemblages scattered across dozens of dance  
 22 videos, remixes, and all manner of personalized instantiations, revisions,  
 23 and extensions, which, taken together, appear to take hip-hop’s originary  
 24 repurposing of vinyl and subsequent adoption of sampling into yet another  
 25 phase of the genre’s challenge to notions of authorship and ownership in  
 26 popular culture.

27 As the very ontology of musical commodities has been joyfully dis-  
 28 mantled on YouTube and the like, so have many other things, including  
 29 hip-hop itself. For all of hip-hop’s outsize presence on YouTube, one could  
 30 also argue that YouTube—standing in synecdochically for the larger  
 31 Internet—has itself radically refigured hip-hop by placing it alongside an  
 32 unprecedented collection of other forms, genres, and styles. The vast cul-  
 33 tural cornucopia at YouTube can even make something so dominant as  
 34 hip-hop seem but another thing to sample from the culture at large, espe-  
 35 cially for curious young people with broadband connections and plenty of  
 36 time. Like so many other things, faced with the irreducibility of its own  
 37 diversity, hip-hop’s formerly hegemonic self-image—forged in the tough  
 S38 crucibles of gang-ridden cities and made hyperreal by gangsta theater—  
 R39 has cracked in the digital mirror that is YouTube. Clearly, a previously  
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stringent regime of representing black masculinity has yielded to a marked openness to idiosyncrasy, if not outright taboo crossing. The current generation reshaping hip-hop are data flâneurs, empowered by the generally safe distance provided by digital mediation and engaged in the sort of playful theatrics that the web seems to engender (Watkins 2009). These are young people so confident in—or at least bold about—their own understanding of what’s important and what’s cool that they are comfortable challenging longstanding sartorial and behavioral mores. “I’m doing me” has become the mantra of this generation, a sentiment echoed and affirmed in the complex feedback loop between grassroots hip-hop scenes like jerkin and such mainstream avatars as Lil Wayne, Kanye West, and Drake, all of whom wear their sensitivities on their sleeves (if in alternation with an unmistakable machismo). Hence, jerkin could be said to embody and revive classical hip-hop forms and values even as its specific content sometimes serves to propel a profound turn for hip-hop. So comfortable are some of these kids in their own skin that a mixed-gender jerkin group like AirBorn Allstarz can boast, tongues only partly in cheek, that they look so fresh and clean in their “White Girl Clothes” and “White Boy Clothes” (2008). More explicitly courting controversy, Lil B recently released a mixtape with the provocative (if misleading) title, *I’m Gay* (2011). But such button pushing is hardly a settled matter. For some, especially stakeholders of the old order, all of the acts mentioned in this final section have crossed the line into a sort of buffoonery. For other observers, however, hip-hop’s reinvigorated plasticity might offer a hopeful sign.

**Conclusion: The Choice Is Yours**

Some forty years after hip-hop took root as local youth culture in the Bronx, the genre shows few signs of abating as a cultural force. Hip-hop’s reign over popular culture is remarkable at this point, especially if we compare to the heydays of jazz, rock, or soul. Like these earlier genres, hip-hop stands both as a marker of the resilience of African American culture and as an expression of national integrity. Although produced and consumed by people spanning all racial categories and social classes, hip-hop’s persistent, putative blackness means that it stands as a special, and freighted, resource for black youth. Even as that may give concerned parties pause, an appreciation of hip-hop aesthetics that goes beneath glossy gangsta surfaces to emphasize the genre’s irrepressible refashionability offers great ground for engagement. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a

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1 more compelling explanation for hip-hop’s longevity as popular (and  
 2 grassroots) culture than its essential flexibility, its imperative to “flip the  
 3 script”—a restless orientation toward remaking the world of popular cul-  
 4 ture, and all the models and myths it offers up, developed out of an origi-  
 5 nary and sustained play with technologies of media reproduction. This  
 6 orientation entails a number of central values and practices—technical  
 7 competency and media savvy, competitive creativity and inventive reuse,  
 8 communal engagement around shared texts—that should be of interest to  
 9 anyone anxious about the ironic disparity between hip-hop’s remarkable  
 10 cultural production and socioeconomic outcomes for black youth.

11 The refashioning of popular culture—an increasingly commonplace  
 12 activity in today’s world of socially networked, embeddable media—nec-  
 13 cessarily involves an articulation of one’s own relationship to it, and hence,  
 14 if sometimes subtly, a remodeling of the self. So it makes sense that across  
 15 hip-hop’s varied expressions since the 1970s one of the more salient  
 16 threads to emerge is how powerfully the genre fosters a commitment to  
 17 self-fashioning—as a DJ or a producer, an MC or a rapper, an artist or a  
 18 hustler (or both). The brave new attempts at public self-fashioning so cen-  
 19 tral to youth culture—and to hip-hop—in an age of social media could  
 20 thus prove galvanizing and useful, even if the content of a particular  
 21 Soulja Boy or jerkin song is absurd, vulgar, or needlessly demeaning.  
 22 Rather than dwelling on such content, better to attend to the aesthetic  
 23 principles and procedures that have made hip-hop such an enduring and  
 24 inspiring force in the lives of young people. Targeted toward education  
 25 and policymaking, recent research on the intersections between new  
 26 media and youth cultural production have taken special note of how hip-  
 27 hop offers, in the words of Patricia Lange and Mizuko Ito, “a particularly  
 28 important case” for understanding how young people deal with the pro-  
 29 fusion of media in their everyday lives (2009, 269). The lead authors of an  
 30 ambitious effort to document how contemporary youth practices “change  
 31 the dynamics of youth-adult negotiations over literacy, learning, and  
 32 authoritative knowledge” (2), Lange and Ito argue for hip-hop’s special  
 33 significance as “a genre of music that was ahead of the curve in terms of  
 34 developing styles of sampling and remix, as well as being grounded within  
 35 very active amateur production communities where youth develop cre-  
 36 ative identities and competencies” (269).

37 As outlined in the preceding section, hip-hop provided a solid cultural  
 S38 foundation for today’s moment of media turbulence, interactivity, and  
 R39 coproduction, especially for black youth; in turn, hip-hop is undergoing  
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yet another phase of reconfiguration by a generation for whom the entire procedure is second nature. This is certainly an opening—first and foremost for hip-hop’s devoted practitioners, but also for the broader constituency of stakeholders concerned with the feedback loop between culture and society, from activists and educators, to parents, politicians, and producers. Hence, to ignore or suppress rather than support hip-hop’s uncontainable dynamism, its openness to shape shifting and syncretism, its imperatives for “flipping the script” and independently producing oneself (and one’s sense of self), represents more than a missed opportunity. Overlooking hip-hop’s irrepressible refashionability is tantamount to giving up on connecting with young people at all.

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