Hip Hop and the City: How Rap Music Evolved Within New York

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Hip hop and rap is a genre of music that has represented itself as the music of revolution. Created as an outlet for people to express their “public concern and censorious complaint[s]” (Tanner et al, 694), it allowed for many oppressed ethnic groups to rebel and express their voice against the conditions they faced in the urbanizing city. Hip hop and Rap’s origin can be located to the Bronx of New York City, where it became the culture of the poor working-class (Black, 700). Hip hop was born in the breakdown of Keynesian Fordism, with the increase on the ‘war on drugs’ and the rise of mass incarceration of poor black and brown men (Black, 702). Deindustrialization of the city intensified, and hip hop and rap became the outlet for urban poor to voice their opinions on multiple problems within their community, such as: violence in gangs, gender and sexuality; racism and poverty (Black, 700). In the 1980s, the Bronx was viewed by New York with the same perspective society saw the musical culture of hip hop and rap; “explosive images of [society] as predators, robbers, rapist, murderers’ (Berman, 171). The genre of hip hop and rap slowly merged into other areas of New York’s metropolitan area, such as Manhattan. Rap has recently also found itself in other major cities around the world, such as Paris, Toronto and Tokyo (Black, 700; Tanner et al 695). Rappers from the Bronx and onwards emerged during this time as well, such as: Grandmaster Flash and the furious five, Tupac, Nas, The Beastie Boys, and 3rd Bass (Berman, 170; Lamotte, 687). With the emergence of profound white rappers such as The Beastie Boys, it was seen that hip hop and rap was no longer a black ethnic genre, with the split between “gansta rap “ and “pop rap”(Berman, 170); where “gangsta rap” allowed for a “genre that could channel the tidal flow of pain and rage that flooded American inner cities in the [1980s] of malign neglect. Therefore, within this essay I will delve into the importance of the emergence of hip hop and rap as the voice of the oppressed people within the city; by using the actor of the Bronx of New York and the lyrics of Nas’ *Illmatic* to define the lifestyle that emerged out of the Bronx in the 1980s

In the 1970s, the poorest population of New York lived through a period of disillusionment. Majority of the urban poor were people of black ethnicity, and resided within the urban ghettos of: Queens, the Bronx and the East Village, where they became segregated by the rest of New York (Lamotte, 687). Segregation led to isolated communities within the urban ghettos. Where street gangs rose up to become the leaders of these neighborhoods. Neighbourhoods lead by street gangs led to an increase of crime in the areas, and arranged parties known as “block parties” became regular occurrences within the city. These block parties became the “heart of the cultural movement, [where the] hip hop culture […] has continued to grow ever since” (Lamotte, 687). Hip hop and rap is seen as the “form of protest music, offering its listeners a message of resistance” (Tanner et al, 697). It is rooted in the struggle for public space and a claim for street presence, based on the rap artists’ struggle for territorial control. This form of rap, called “gangsta rap” acted to serve as a counter-protest movement, as a creative form of communication that used everyday life experiences as a base for artist to critique social society. Within “gangsta rap” there are one of four style of explosive violence which takes place. These four scenarios are: Shoot-out between rival gangs; shoot-out between two gangsters; sexual encounters; cops stop the rapper with police brutality (Berman, 171). However, rap also introduced the ideas of territorial stigmatization to the residents of the Bronx. As in media, representation of the explosive violence of the “gangsta rapper” has concluded the rest of society to associate New York as a centre of crime and violence in the 1980s. Urban poverty disillusioned many people outside of New York, especially with the imagery of the ruined Bronx post-Fordism. The Bronx was stigmatized as an area of low income and education, with high violence and crime. This representation poorly “misrepresented the community and the experience of black people in the United States” (Tanner et al, 696), as many residents have quoted “we come from ruins, but we are not ruined” (Berman, 168). The people of the Bronx were not to be viewed as “saintly” however; many viewed them as authentic. Rappers from the Bronx were seen to be the focal point of the authenticity of the Bronx, as the city had though them to talk, and allowed them to get as far into the city as possible (Berman, 169).

To get an understanding of how “gangsta rap” undertook the alteration of the city of New York and how the city affected the message of “gangsta rap”, I use the music of Nasir Bin Olu Dara Jones, better known as Nas. As many rappers produced lyrics of injustice, and oppression of black Americans, it is seen that Nas has also taken that perception of society into his 1994 album *Illmatic.* The perception of violence and crime of the residents of the Bronx is seen through his first song “N.Y. State of Mind”. “N.Y State of Mind” is a song which takes the representation of the urban poor of New York. With representation of street violence within the lyrics with “suited up in street clothes, hand me a 9 and I’ll defeat foes” (Nas, 12), showing the crime behaviours of gangs within New York, with the biggest example being the reference to Scarface, the biggest gangster of New York in his time. However, “N.Y State of Mind” also shows the alternative side to society within the city, with bystanders being hit by “stray bullets” (Nas, 70), as “each block is like a maze; [f]ull of black rats trapped” (Nas, 79). Lastly the song also shows the authenticity of the rap genre, as it is a representation of rebellion. The song refers to teaching the listeners about the urban life of New York, exemplifying the listeners the “New York[‘s] state of mind”. “N.Y State of Mind” gets he listener to consider the “gansta rap” theme of rebellion. However, Nas also consideres the outsiders of the rebellion; the ones who are stigmatized by association of the city, and the urban ghetto.

Another song which comes out of Nas’ “Illmatic” is the song “Memory Lane (Sittin’ in da Park)”. This song, unlike “N.Y State of Mind”, reminisces on Nas’ past childhood of living within the New York Ghettos. He again shows the violent crime ridden city, with reference to guns, police brutality and the gang fights between separate groups. This however is seen from a past scene, with a child Nas growing within the city and “[growing] up in the trife life, the times of white lines; […] murderous night times | and knife fights invite crimes” (Nas, 32). This shows the violent lifestyle of New York many outsiders perceived of the New York ghettos. However, “Memory Lane (sittin’ in the park), also gets the listeners to consider the authenticity of: the city, the rap, and the rapper. Lyrics like “Word to Christ, a disciple of streets, trifle on beats | I decipher prophecies through a mic and say ‘peace’” (Nas, 80), show the ideas of the rap rebellion within the city. Nas states that he spreads the words of peace through the medium of Rap, and shows who he raps for, which are the people who are oppressed by the city. Especially the “listeners and prisoners” (Nas, 8), who are oppressed within New York in the 1980s.

With the quick analysis of lyrics from Nas’ *Illmatic*, we have to take into consideration; who is the new demographic of rap and hip hop? And how “gangsta rap” has shifted from rebellion to a watered-down commodification of the original. With the popularity of “gangsta rap” in the early 1990s, there was a shift of the listeners of the music. As musicians started to gain popularity within Hollywood for a new visual form of medium for rap, the “gangsta rap” movies (Berman, 172), the New York rap scene was starting to be appreciated and appropriated by all classes and cultures of people. Rap became a mainstream concept, where its ideals of rebellion became a part of the American youth culture in the late 20th century (Berman, 172). Many studies show that the “mainstreaming of rap [had] cost the genre its underground or counter-culture status as protest music” (Tanner et al, 699). With many stating that with the involvement of white culture and white rappers within the scene has changed the meaning and significance of the genre, as rap is based on an “authentic version of black street life,[…] [s]triving for subcultural status” (Tanner et al, 712).

However, I believe that rap has not changed in its message of rebellion. What has changed is who is being oppressed within the city. No longer is New York hip hop attempts to “negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American history, identity and community” (Black, 702). It has spread itself through the country, and its “resistive appeal” is no longer “restricted to black youth” rather to all people who are living within urban poverty (Tanner et al, 697). Rap has spread itself throughout the world as well, as it has been seen within cities of France, as “French rap has become the music of choice for young people of visible minority descent who have grown up in the suburban ghettos of major cities” (Tanner et al, 697). Past rappers, as they have become rich due to their genre popularity have started to make their listeners feel betrayed as they feel it has become inauthentic, and these once “gansta rappers” have become “soft” (Berman, 176).

Rap’s expansion within the New York scene wasn’t most influenced by race, rather by class. Within the Bronx, the population was majority black ethnic; but was also filled with smaller groups of oppressed ethnic groups: Jewish, Latino, Asian, Irish (Berman, 169). Therefore, rap has been based on “inter-city communities” of “urban ethnographies” rather than black communities (Black, 703). Considering Louis Wirth’s theory of “Urbanism as a way of life”, rap has counteracted the problems of urbanization found within Wirth’s theory of Urbanism. Considering Wirth, density can be measured. As an urban area is growing, “differentiations and specializations are produced” (Wirth, 119). Examples of the Bronx can be seen with the growing gangs of the 80s, which varied from block to block, as well as the segregation of the classes within the Bronx can show the increase in crime, violence and gangs within the Bronx (Wirth, 119). Urban personalities show connections between the ethnic diversity of the Bronx as well, as these urbanites develop a personality through the culture of rap (Wirth, 122). The sense of the rap community is developed through this theory as well, as rap was created as “a new social critique in the wake of the civil rights movement” (Lamotte, 687). Rap created a way for people of all ethnic diversity to rebel against discrimination within New York in the late 20th century.

The hip-hop and rap culture of New York was formed on ethnic discrimination, and was created as a way for people of the Bronx to fight against the issues of urban poverty. “Gangsta rap” in recent years has been represented as a way only for black minorities to speak their problems. But rap is for all people of the streets to express their rebellion against the city, as stated by Nas in his song “Memory Lane (Sittin’ in the Park) and “N.Y State of Mind”. Urban poverty and misery in the 21st century are now, and always has been a multicultural problem (Berman, 164). Due to the isolation many feel due to urbanisation, many become ignorant to different ethnic group’s existence in urban poverty. Rap acts as the medium to this, and allowed for a diversity of ethnic groups to rebel against the oppression within the city. Hip hop and rap emerged out of the “dungeons” of the Bronx in New York, which allowed for the people of the ghettos to rebel against the discrimination created by urbanization.

Resources

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