

The Evolution of Hip-Hop

by Michael Balangue

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Hip-hop, as a cultural force, has grown to mirror the culture it lives in and represents a narrative that had never been represented before in America. Rap, one of the five elements of hip-hop culture defined by Afrika Bambaataa (Aubry) that involves rhyming over a beat, has been highly controversial. One subgenre of rap known as "gangsta" rap still comes under fire today for its hyper-masculine lyrics involving violence, drugs, alcohol, money, and misogyny. The epitome of the "gangsta" rapper was Tupac Shakur (1971–1996), whose poignant and authentic portrayal of life on the streets in the Bronx and Brooklyn earned him unprecedented fame and whose scandalous personal life led to quite a bit of controversy. Tupac's take on "gangsta" rap defined the hip-hop music industry and popularized the genre with American audiences. Tupac's music expressed "realness," an idea prevalent within hip-hop that artists must stay authentic and "true to oneself" (Williams 4). Tupac's music was also special in the way that audiences could identify with it, especially those who grew up in similarly low-status conditions. This group of listeners, though, was very focused in comparison with the wider audience of hip-hop listeners from all races and backgrounds. Tupac had listeners who enjoyed and sympathized with his music and lyrics, yet they never lived in situations from which they could directly relate to his lived experience. Recently, hip-hop's sound has been evolving and

changing to reflect a different attitude in America. The idea of authenticity plays a large role for hip-hop fans, and, as times have begun to change, the idea of "realness" has been challenged. What constitutes authentic hip-hop, and what does this portrayal mean in terms of hip-hop's cultural force? The answer lies within the audience—as listeners recognize authenticity, we define the impact that hip-hop artists make and the influence they have on the genre.

But first let's acknowledge that the influence of the hip-hop music industry itself plays a huge role in our understanding of authenticity and how hip-hop authenticity is decided. Tricia Rose, professor of Africana Studies at Brown University and author of *The Hip-Hop Wars* (2008), explains the notion of "keeping it real" as "both representing a particular Black ghetto street life and being truthful about one's relationship to that life" (136). However, one of the five main problems she has with this idea is that "the 'keeping it real argument' denies the capacity of corporate power over commercial mainstream hip-hop to move this genre away from complex, diverse images of Black youth and toward stereotypical ones" (143). After the large commercial success of "gangsta" artists such as Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G., Rose argues that the music industry, not audiences, first latched on to "gangsta's" appeal and forced the hip-hop music scene into a perpetually "gangsta" style. However, there is a



Satirical graffiti targeting the frequent claim that hip-hop has a influence on American youth..

line that one cannot cross, one that involves "youth rage directed at police and racism" (143), that Rose believes caused so much public outcry that record companies had to shut down the promotion of "gangsta" lyrics. The loss of profit from either not being "real" enough or from being "too real" shows that corporate influence does, in fact, have an impact on the type of music that audiences hear.

In her 2011 master's thesis, "Images of African-American Masculinity in Hip Hop Music," Petra Filipová draws on Rose's arguments, saying that

themes of Black-on-Black violence and misogyny continue to proliferate in mainstream hip hop because they constitute a threat neither to the establishment, nor to the record sales. ...Portrayals of African American males as boastful, sexist, violent, and vicious villains markedly outweigh positive imagery of masculinity in popular hip hop that together with expressions of social criticism or resistance remain peripheral. (45-46)

Artists who want to have their music heard and gain some sort of popularity are forced to either fit into a mold that they may or may not completely truly embody or lose corporate sponsorship from the record companies. Although this may have been true for the 1990s through the early 2000s, it does not explain how it was possible for a new, less traditionally "real" hip-hop, or "conscious" rap, to gain any sort of mainstream popularity. In stark contrast to "gangsta" rap, "conscious" rap is, as described by Michael Eric Dyson, "rap that is socially aware and consciously connected to historic patterns of political protest and aligned with progressive forces of social critique" (qtd. in Forman 4). If the record companies held so much control over what music could or couldn't become popular, how did artists like Kanye West achieve the popularity that he did as early as his first album *The College Dropout* (2004)? West, although physically fitting the stereotypical image of the hip-hop rapper as a

young Black male, did not embody the same type of "realness" perceived in rappers prior. Growing up in a south-side suburb of Chicago, the son of a journalist and a professor, West had the privilege of higher education and a stable family life ("Kanye"), a far cry from the "gangsta" life stereotype of hip-hop artists popularized in the 1990s. Joel Penney provides evidence of the pivot hip-hop music made in an interesting comparison between the sales of recordings by rappers 50 Cent and West in 2007. He notes, "The year 2007 saw both 50 Cent and West releasing new albums on the same day, and a high-profile chart war resulted; the clear winner was West, as his *Graduation* sold 957,000 copies in its first week while 50 Cent's *Curtis* sold 691,000" (323). So, what was the cause of this surge of audience attention to socially conscious hip-hop music from West? One very important factor was the power provided to listeners by the Internet.

The Internet provided new stomping grounds for artists to promote their music and to find an audience without having to jump through the hoops of paying for and signing to a record label. According to Filipová, "...The age of electronic media gives exposure to any artist who desires to share his creativity with the rest of the world. ... This concept of music's democratization significantly diminishes the power of corporate supremacy and encourages the genre's diversification of content and styles" (52-53). Filipová's summary of the impact of the Internet on music provides a succinct explanation for artists like West's success: as music becomes "democratized," listeners have the power to decide what they enjoy, despite West not fitting the image of hip-hop generated by the music industry. Jay-Z claimed that "many saw [West] as a producer first and foremost, and that his background contrasted with that of his labelmates" (Filipová 52-53). West's background as a suburban, middle-class American plays a large role in understanding why he would not have seen much popularity in the previous generation of hip-hop, as the entity

that previously defined popular hip-hop music (the record companies) would have decided that West doesn't fit the "gangsta" image they were trying to sell. Nonetheless, West released a mix-tape called *Get Well Soon...* which was available for free on the Internet in December 2002 (Filipová 52–53). In comparison to the radio air-play or MTV runtime that "gangsta" rappers desperately needed in order for us to hear them, the Internet allowed West to put out his music for free for all audiences to hear. And we responded.

Classically, there is a representation of the Black male rapper that is more than just his physical embodiment. Regina Bradley, borrowing from Richard Majors in her article on "Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose," explains "cool pose" as "the performance and positioning of the Black male body as a symbol of coolness" (55). This pose, in the 1990s to early 2000s, was cool because of its aggressiveness, its representation of a "gangsta" lifestyle that a relatively small portion of society, mainly lower-status Black men, could identify with. Additionally, other audiences, such as suburban white males, enjoyed the music because it represented a lifestyle that seemed edgy and because it fulfilled a stereotype. The pose of the "gangsta" was sold to hip-hop listeners to garner airplay and further artists' marketability: it was the only idea about hip-hop that many audiences had due to the limited, and limiting, avenues for accessing music. West's background and image did not fulfill the stereotype, and thus did not appeal to lower-status Black youth, nor was it cool to other audiences: it did not match the "gangsta" pose popularized by the record companies. The Internet, however, allowed West to break past the barrier of mass-media exposure and present his work to those who chose to listen.

Previously, artists' new music could not be heard until it was released on the radio or appeared physically in stores as a vinyl record, cassette tape, or CD. But digital sales of music have become the norm, and a simple download from home makes it easy for listeners to quickly enjoy

to their favorite music. Not only did it make it easier, it also made it possible for music to reach a wider range of audiences and for listeners to connect with others with similar taste. The Internet provided an opportunity for the cool pose to relax, which undoubtedly had a profound effect on West's and other new rappers' careers. However, our use of the Internet in 2002 and since raises more questions than it answers. Has the audience's use of the Internet changed hip-hop culture itself and have these changed messages and identities simply surfaced or have they evolved within hip-hop?

Joel Penney argues, "It seems that the well-established subgenre of gangsta rap—defined by physical toughness, dominance over women, and resolutely heteronormative sexual behavior—no longer appears to have a monopoly over constructions of the Black male body in mainstream hip-hop culture" (322). Written in 2012, this relatively modern take on the "cool pose" represents the shift that the audiences of the Internet era have helped create. While Penny admits that the breakdown of the industry-influenced "gangsta" figure in hip-hop was significant, he approaches hip-hop masculinity by focusing specifically on ways of dress, and addresses homophobia within hip-hop culture that surfaced after this new wave of "conscious" rappers emerged. Expressing his thoughts on clothing, Penney includes an excerpt from rapper Beanie Sigel, in which he bashes West and Pharrell Williams for their embrace of fashion. According to Sigel, "It is not just their own behavior and image that is at stake here, but seemingly the entire future of hip-hop's hyper-masculine identity as a whole" (qtd. in Penney 328). Despite the backlash from industry members like Sigel, hip-hop fashion has now become "cool" to audiences with the help of the Internet, where trends are being led by rappers like West, Williams, and A\$AP Rocky. Williams, in *Fresh Dressed* (2015), a documentary about hip-hop fashion, states, "By the time we hit the 2000s, you got to watch the trends because of all the traffic

and all the activity that was happening online." In identifying the changing tides in how male rap artists express creativity with clothing, Penney finds that the idea of hyper-masculinity in hip-hop is being challenged and, to an extent, rejected. The fact that artists who don't physically embody a "gangsta" are popularized by wider audiences from the Internet is a testament to the level of accessibility that these new hip-hop artists have. You don't have to look or act "gangsta" to connect with an artist's music now; being tough and masculine holds less significance to the artist, and listeners are receptive to this change, many embracing new images and styles for themselves.

The audience's new receptivity to the malleability of the cool pose is key to the explanation of West's popularity. Bradley explains that "HHSCP (Hip Hop Sonic Cool Pose) offers a discursive space of varying and frequently conflicting performances of cool and its attachment to Blackness as commodity and lived experiences" (60). As early as *Graduation*, Kanye raps, "Back when they thought pink Polos would hurt the Roc" (West), and as recently as *Yeezus* (2013), Kanye wrote, "Old niggas mentally still in high school/ Since the tight jeans they ain't never liked you/ Pink-ass polos with a fuckin' backpack/ But everybody know you brought real rap back" (West). West is cognizant of what he represents and is confident that he can eradicate the cool pose: in fact, he declares that attempts to mimic the classic cool pose are misguided, inauthentic, and not representative of "real rap." He grew up in a suburb of Chicago with his English-professor mother and even lived in China for a while; he went to college and dropped out to pursue a music career ("Kanye"). West embodies a typical middle-class person not generally associated with the Black male body in the gangsta pose of hip-hop past. West's authenticity is obvious through his expression of his progression from being a young college-dropout-made-producer to his deep emotional heartbreak to his growth as an

international superstar and the lavish lifestyle that comes with it. Despite not embodying any of the classically "gangsta" stereotypes, audiences have decided that West does a better job of "keepin' it real" than those putting on a façade to match the original cool pose. Other popular artists, such as Drake, share the sentiment and capitalize on the difference, with lyrics including lines like, "'Cause I'm not acting tough/ Or making stories up 'bout where I'm actually from" and "Pray the real live forever man/ Pray the fakes get exposed." The pose has been replaced, and the modern age of technology has provided a new avenue for hip-hop authenticity to be determined by the listeners, whose understanding of authenticity is less exclusive than ever before.

West directly addresses the aggressive hyper-masculinity of the pose by talking about male friendship. In "Family Business" from *The College Dropout* (2004), he explains, "All my niggas from the Chi, that's my family dog/ And my niggas ain't my guys, they my family dog/ I feel like one day you'll understand me dog/ You can still love your man and be manly dog" (West). Matthew Oware analyzes these lyrics, writing, "Contrary to the blatant homophobia in most rap music, Kanye presents an ostensibly anti-homophobic stance wherein he fully embraces the idea of demonstrating affection for another male, yet maintaining 'manliness'." By expounding on West's apparent anti-homophobia within the typically homophobic state of hip-hop, Oware describes how West has expressed an open and "conscious" stance in terms of friendship in a genre that still feels the pressure of homophobic hyper-masculinity as cool. West's association with his male companions embraces an open, unafraid stance on the emotions he feels for his friends. West delves deeper in "Real Friends," as he addresses not the friendship itself, but the complexities of fame, fortune, and its effect on his personal relationships with close friends and family. West raps, "Real friends, how many of us?/ How many of us, how many jealous?/ Real friends, it's not

many of us, we smile at each other/ But how many honest? Trust issues" (2016). We can identify with West's introspective raps, as friendships and trust are aspects of life that everyone deals with. West's ideas are accessible not only to less-privileged Black youth, the original target listeners of "gangsta" rap, but to the general public as well.

Romantic relationships are just as universal as friendship, and West's influence on romance in hip-hop was perhaps the biggest impact he made in expanding hip-hop audiences and furthering the genre lyrically and sonically. In his album *808s & Heartbreak* (2008), Kanye for the first time broke down the highly sexualized, unemotional "gangsta" stereotype prevalent in hip-hop music. According to an unidentified but well-informed *Wikipedia* writer, "...*808's & Heartbreak*...impacted hip hop stylistically, as it laid the groundwork for a new wave of artists who generally eschewed typical rap braggadocio for intimate subject matter and introspection" ("Kanye"). *808s* fully embraced "conscious" rap, expanding on complex, personal connections and feelings. This was the first time that the idea of a real, human, emotional being had ever appeared in the hip-hop world to this extent, especially from an artist who had already established a large, diverse audience. Artists such as Tupac had recorded emotional songs like "Dear Mama" (1995), but until 2008, no popular hip-hop artists had any lyrics that revealed themselves emotionally to the extent that West does on *808s & Heartbreak*: the entire album is in response to his painful break up with his fiancé and the devastating death of his mother. Vulnerable and introspective lyrics and minimal, bleak sounds are its foundations, such as those found in the sparse "Coldest Winter." West writes, "On lonely nights, I start to fade/ Her love is a thousand miles away/ Memories made in the coldest winter/ Goodbye my friend, will I ever love again?" (2008). The lyrics, although simple, add to the emotional rawness of West's work. *808s* was taken in both directions by audi-

ences, and as *Pitchfork* reviewer Scott Plagenhoef writes, "In the end, whether you care to envelope yourself into West's pain and self-torment largely depends on what you already think of the artist." We identify with West's vulnerability and romanticism. Heartbreak and heartache are not bound by race or social standing and do not require a certain lifestyle to be understood. They are purely human feelings that transcend any kind of social limitations. The difference between *808s* and traditionally popular hip-hop is that rather than focusing on the heated, carnal emotions of passionate lust and aggression, West reflects on the deep effects of love and romance on one's own soul. Rose comments on the hypersexuality of "gansta" hip-hop, saying, "Through hip hop, young white fans can get a good dose of male domination of women ...without taking any responsibility for it" (235). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, not only has West's work torn down our only representation of masculinity as embodied in the hypersexuality of "gansta" rappers, but it has also shown not to be simply an exception to the rule.

With the huge boom in popularity of artists like Drake, The Weeknd, and Frank Ocean, hip-hop has evolved. These artists, whose entire discographies are primarily based on the same kind of romantic, dark lyrics and sound on *808s & Heartbreak*, are a testament to the impact of West's album and to the appreciation of his listeners. The fact that this darker, R&B-influenced hip-hop sound has gained so much popularity (not only as its own genre but as a major influence in the space of hip-hop culture itself) tells us that hip-hop has evolved as a result of our reception of the universal ideas expressed in deeply "conscious" rap, ideas that don't have to fit a stereotype to feel authentic.

A new side of hip-hop hasn't simply emerged; the whole notion of hip-hop and the cool pose itself is changing and evolving in response to audience receptiveness to a more well-rounded picture of the human being behind the lyrics. This

reception is creating a cultural impact—not in the same sense as an artist like Tupac by redefining the genre, but by artists like West undefining the genre. That is, the specificity of the mold required to become a popular hip-hop artist has been dialed back, and the people have approved. No longer is the message that listeners themselves must fit the classic cool pose of hip-hop in order to enjoy, appreciate, or identify with it. It opens up hip-hop to continue to grow and evolve to follow the changing tides of diversified culture, advancing technology, and the listeners themselves: it is a testament to the nature of hip-hop as a cultural force, and one that will stop at nothing to stay relevant to us.

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