

## Rap Rhymes and Social Justice

IDA Kiyoshi

MIYAGI NATIONAL COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY

### **Introduction: Hip Hop and the Harlem Renaissance**

Hip hop is the second major cultural movement by Afro-American people living in the United States. In the late 1970s, a new form of popular culture in the inner city of New York (first emerging in the Bronx) attracted people's great attention. It consisted of dance, art, and music. The dance was called break dance, characterized by acrobatic, quick actions like a well-made humanoid. The art was called aerosol art, which looked like children's graffiti but had a simple and powerful vitality. And the music was called rap, a primordial mixture of music and words, which was performed by DJs handling turntables and MCs rapping through microphones.<sup>1</sup>

Hip hop is the second major cultural movement by Afro-Americans. The first one is, of course, the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. Both the movements share some similarities, but also have obvious differences.

The first difference is in the cultural categories. Hip hop is primarily categorized as popular culture, while the activities of the Harlem Renaissance are regarded as art culture, though we can find some art aspects in hip hop and some pop aspects in the Harlem Renaissance.

The second is the difference in the age bracket of producers. In the hip hop movement, young people in their early twenties or late teens took active parts, while the Harlem Renaissance was a mature cultural movement by professional writers and artists in the older age group.

The third is the difference in the cultural roots. Many of the producers of hip hop were born and grew up in the street of the city, so their expression form was consequently urbanized. But the producers of the Harlem Renaissance mostly came from rural communities or local cities, and their cultural works reflected their own local identity.

The fourth is the difference in the amount of wealth. As hip hop became a big business in the 1980s, many rappers and painters gained world wide reputations and huge sums of money. The Harlem Renaissance produced some important writers in the history of American literature, but their readers were very limited, so they had to live on meager incomes.

The fifth is the difference in the quickness and power of the response. The

styles of hip hop were imitated and revised among young people around the world very quickly. On the other hand, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance were forgotten after the Depression, never to have a strong cultural influence.<sup>2</sup>

## **I. Outline of Early Rap**

### **A. Birth of Rap**

Rap music was born in the poor urban districts of New York City in the late 1970s. At that time, due to the depression after the first oil crisis, many of young Afro-Americans had great troubles in daily life. They diverted themselves in cheap dance parties held at small dance halls and clubs, sometimes at the basements of old buildings and vacant lots in the street. DJs selected good discs for dancing, and put free chatting on the tunes. The gossips of the street and the bragging of DJs themselves entertained young dancers, and there appeared many popular DJs in various districts one after another.

### **B. Root of Rap**

Many of early hip hop DJs came from the Caribbean islands or had Caribbean relatives. Jamaican reggae music was born in the late 1960s, and became very popular among young Afro-Jamaicans living in the slums of Kingston or other cities. This classical root reggae developed into a new style, the DJ style, in the late 1970s. DJs played “versions,” vocal-less discs, and mixed their talks to encourage the audience to dance. The language of their talks was “Patois,” the vernacular English in Jamaica, and their topics tended to be self-conscious or social-minded. It was easy and natural for young Afro-Americans to reproduce the Caribbean situation on the corner of the street in the United States.

### **C. Techniques of Early Rap**

In early rap, DJs played the two same vinyl discs at the same time, and repeated the “break,” a short, attractive phrase less than 30 or so seconds, without pause endlessly. The sources of sampling ranged all over the fields of popular music, from black root music to white rock.

DJs also invented the technique to make a rhythmic noise by turning the disc oppositely with the cushion of a finger. It was called “scratch”, and some DJs revised the original tunes with the mixer and the rhythm machine by adding percussive effects.

Their techniques were very low-tech, but its easiness and openness got the sympathy of the youth seeking instant fun.

### **D. Music and Words of Early Rap**

In 1979, an independent record company put this situation on a commercial basis. The product was a “Rapper’s Delight,” the first hit record of rap music.

The musical composition of the tune is very simple. It is the direct borrowing

from “Good Times,” a popular hit song by Chic, and the recording band repeats the hook line of the song for about 15 minutes with rhythmic emphasis.

On the other hand, the words of “Rapper’s Delight” are very unique. They are told in “ebonics”, the Afro-American vernacular in the inner city. What the DJs say is regarded as a stupid tall tale from the general literary standard. But it would excite the audience like the art of a storyteller.

The poor young DJs make a false show of authority as if they were rich executives, and the audience enjoys their talk knowing what they are. The self-sufficient autobiography reflects the reality of the urban life of Afro-American people and their oral tradition.

The lyrics of “Rapper’s Delight” are a kind of verbal play. But we can find a sprout for various possibilities of expression through the Afro-American vernacular.

## **II. Rap and Other Styles of Popular Music**

### **A. Rap in the History of Afro-American Music**

In the history of Afro-American popular music, rap has several unique aspects. As I mentioned, the music of early rap consisted of sampling and revising (or mixing). It was easier for everyone to compose tunes, so young people could make rap records without money, time, and the skills. On jazz, rhythm and blues, and soul, performers should be professional with excellent skills. Rap is the only music which juveniles and amateurs could easily approach.

The next aspect is found in the lyrics, which are called “rhymes” among the hip hop generation. Rap rhymes are essentially self-conscious and social-minded like the lyrics of Jamaican reggae. The information of rap rhymes is double or treble in volume compared to that of traditional popular song lyrics. They are beyond song lyrics, and seem to be short stories or social messages.

On its quality and quantity of rhymes, rap can assert its existence. I would like to present some examples from previous musical styles so as to make the uniqueness of rap rhymes clearer.

### **B. Lyrics of Classic and Country Blues**

Blues records were produced by independent companies since the 1920s. There were two types of the blues. One was classic blues composed by professional composers and sung by professional female singers with well arranged accompaniment. The other was country blues anonymously composed and sung by semi-professional male singers with their own guitars.

Many of the lyrics of early blues were related to the feeling of rural Afro-Americans. They expressed the disappointment in love and the bitterness of poor daily life. Listeners, including whites living in the city, felt sympathy to the emotional dramas of early blues.

However, we can scarcely find political, social, or racial claims there. The

singers might show anger and criticism to the systems of white America in private situations, but there are few traces on commercial records. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the openness of the mind often put Afro-American people in trouble. Though the lyrics of “On Our Turpentine Farm” (1929) on the additional materials may imply racial anger, ordinary listeners would overlook its implication.

### **C. Lyrics of Rhythm & Blues and Urban Blues**

Country blues was refined into city blues in the 1930s. The early design of a male singer-guitarist was renewed as that of a collective performance like a piano-guitar duet or a small combo.

The epoch-making event was the introduction of the electric guitar, which gave the blues a sensual and rocking effect. The new jumping blues was called rhythm & blues in the 1940s, and it became very popular through radio and records to be the mainstream of Afro-American popular music in the 1950s.

The sound of rhythm & blues was vivid and cheerful, challenging the audience to dance. The lyrics were urbanized, describing the city life of Afro-Americans, but they tended to be too standardized to have uniqueness.

On the other hand, an advanced style of city blues was formed in big cities in the 1940s, and it was called urban blues or modern (city) blues. Its sensual performance appealed to the emotions of Afro-American people, especially those from the rural South, and received no small popularity as a mature music.

The urban blues lyrics were essentially individual like old country blues. They reflected the joy and sorrow of the city life of Afro-Americans. Among them, there are some lyrics showing social interests as we find in the extract from “Tax Paying Blues” (1954). They are not so aggressive as the writings of Richard Wright, but the listeners can hear a moderate criticism on social inequality.

### **D. Lyrics of Soul**

In 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr. started his civil rights movement in Montgomery, Alabama. In the same year, Ray Charles released “I Got a Woman,” which was the declaration of a new style of Afro-American popular music, soul. During the 1960s, when the civil rights movement influenced the public opinion and made the government policy change, soul was the theme music of the movement.

In sound, soul was a mixture of rhythm & blues and gospel music. The topics of soul lyrics were not so different from those of rhythm & blues lyrics. But the tone of music was often serious, or sublime in some cases, due to the elements borrowed from gospel music. Even the clichés of popular songs could be re-interpreted and given new meanings.

Have a look on the lyrics from “People Get Ready” (1965) in the additional materials. Listeners will notice a direct echo of the civil rights movement or a collective feeling of the progressive/optimistic 1960s.

### **E. Lyrics of Funk**

Among popular music, funk (or funky) would be used for explaining the “blackness” in jazz performance as early as the 1950s. But now, it usually means a musical style of James Brown and his followers. The characteristics of funk are sermon-like enthusiastic vocals, short attractive riffs of horns and guitars, and fierce percussive rhythms. So without lyrics, funk is so “black” in the tone of music.

In 1969, James Brown released “Say It Loud (I’m Black & I’m Proud)” in protest against the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. If we find a moderate protest in the lyrics of soul, what we recognize in those of funk is a strong longing for social justice.

Despite the big hit of this song, Brown lost his appearance in show business for a while because white promoters hesitated to book him for worrying and causing troubles with the conservatives. Funk had to settle down in Afro-American community as a cult music like modern blues.

But the 1970s was the epoch of political confusion and reconstruction. From that time on, Afro-American performers could be socially and politically positive within a given extent. Even Motown stars like Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye put social elements into their new singles. Also B. B. King, a veteran blues man, was encouraged by the spirit of the age, and sang protest blues songs emotionally.

### **F. Social-Minded Lyrics before Rap: Summary**

In the age of the blues, including electric modern blues, the song lyrics were usually individual and sentimental. After the 1960s, the social-mindedness was emphasized, moderately in soul, positively in funk. Behind this change of attitude, there was a rise in social concern of Afro-American musicians and listeners. And, more importantly, white America came to accept political statements by the social minority.

But even in soul and funk, song lyrics relating to social issues were not great in number, and they were generally less aggressive compared with those of protest songs by the white counter-culture generation. In Afro-American popular lyrics before rap, we find a kind of voluntary constraint or euphemism.<sup>3</sup>

## **III. Aspects of Rap Rhymes**

### **A. Rap Rhymes: Outline**

Even at a glance over several important rap rhymes, we can see the diversification of topics. Rap was born spontaneously as an entertainment for young Afro-Americans living in the inner city. It became popular very rapidly, so early rap developed freely without interference by music companies and promoters.

The topics of early rap range from nonsensical verbal games to serious political discussions. We can classify them into several categories for

Chart 1: Classification of Rap Rhymes

category	mode			similar form
verbal play	playful	private	direct	signifyin(g)
message 1	aggressive destructive	public	direct	appeal accusation
message 2	persuasive creative	public	direct	social reform
literature	speculative suggestive	private/public	figurative	dub poetry

convenience as shown in the chart.

### B. Rap Rhymes as Verbal Play

In the early stage of rap, many of the rhymes are not so different from traditional verbal plays among Afro-American people. Rappers boast themselves, talk about scandals in the street, and abuse snobs and squares in community. Their style of talking looks like that of urban youths who enjoy signifyin(g), a playful exchange of abuse.

We find an example of signifyin(g) on *Die Nigger Die!*, the autobiography of an Afro-American political leader in the 1960s. The author H. Rap Brown portrays a scene of initiation for Afro-American youths by signifyin(g). In this verbal play, they learn how to control the conversation and take the initiative.

Rap Brown and the DJs of “Rapper’s Delight” try to hold the meeting by boasting themselves. Both the statements are not overbearing but highly humorous, so listeners will enjoy their art of storytelling.

Due to this aspect, rap is under the oral tradition of Afro-Americans. Rap was born as an amusement for urban Afro-American youths, so the rhymes are not always social-minded. Nevertheless rap rhymes are genuinely “black” in language itself and in the way of talking. When rappers are conscious of the power of words, the rhymes can be messages.

### C. Rap Rhymes as Message 1

In the political history of the United States, the 1960s was the age of the civil rights movement and the radical activism. During the decade, the living environment of the inner city improved very slowly, but little by little the social minority had a strong voice in politics. In the 1970s and 80s, legal measures for equality were approved one after another.

We can mention “The Breaks” (1980) by Kurtis Blow and “The Message” (1982) by Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five as a few examples of first rap rhymes with social-mindedness. Despite the playful rhymes and half-joking comments, the situations mentioned are so serious not to be overlooked.

Some rap rhymes are more aggressive. Let us have a look on the rhymes of

“Don’t Believe the Hype” (1988) by Public Enemy and “Straight outta Compton,” (1988) by NWA (Niggers with Attitudes). Public Enemy, organized under the influence of The Clash, a British punk band, accused the social injustice of white America. NWA was a super rap unit in the West Coast, and their style was called “Gangsta Rap” due to the belligerence of their attitudes. Their rhymes are strongly political and sometimes violence affirmative, full of hatred for the police.

With a glance over some rhymes of this category, we find strong social-mindedness whether we call it “appeal” or “accusation.”<sup>4</sup>

#### **D. Rap Rhymes as Message 2**

Some rappers not only composed rhymes with social awareness but committed themselves in social reform movements. The opinions of senior rappers like Ice T, Chuck D of Public Enemy were sometimes regarded as public comments on social problems by the media. KRS-One organized the “Stop the Violence Movement” and the “H.E.A.L. (Human Education against Lies)” with other leading rappers, released several hit tunes, and donated no small money to social reform organizations. Their attitudes had a strong influence on the younger generation.

Some female rappers took an active part in this category.<sup>5</sup> They tended to be gender-conscious as well as race-conscious. We take notice of the lines from “Expression” (1989) by Salt ‘n’ Pepa. Though they made their debut as a hip hop icon like the Supremes in the 1960s, they soon changed the policy into moderate feminism to get bigger success.

The more aggressive feminist rhymes of Queen Latifah, Yo Yo, and MC Lyte encouraged Afro-American young women to recognize the reality and act positively.

#### **E. Rap Rhymes as Literature**

Rap is a musical style foregrounding the power of words. There are some similarities between rap and dub poetry.<sup>6</sup> Rap rhymes can develop into literature.

About ten years after the first commercial success of rap, rappers tried to invent the new ways of expression both in rhymes and in sound. For example, the first album of De La Soul contains no less than 24 tunes. They make the musical tracks by the collage from various fields of popular music. And their topics are highly diverse ranging from verbal plays to social dramas. The topics themselves are related to the real life of urban Afro-Americans, but the method of expression is basically objective, or figurative, using literary tools effectively. The rhymes of “Me Myself and I” (1988) is a good example. It looks like a “Song of Myself” of the inner city.

Among literary rhymes of rap, we can find some philosophical ones. Let us have a look at the lines of “Tennessee” (1992) by Arrested Development, an Atlanta musical unit consisting of MCs, DJs, dancers and a 60-year old spiritual

advisor. While the music is well composed and arranged as a catchy rhythm & blues song, the rapper recites the rhymes like singing and takes meditation on the distant past.

#### **F. Rap Rhymes after the 1990s**

Around the arrival of M. C. Hammer, rap music underwent a transformation from an urban cult culture to a big world trend. The sales of records, videos, and other related goods increased drastically. Here was a big business opportunity.

For example, Def Jam, an independent rap record company, became a huge conglomerate in a short time. Major companies like Columbia and EMI contracted with promising rappers across the country. Also typical urban contemporary singers like Janet Jackson and Bobby Brown released hit singles with hip hop elements. To be moderately hip hop was good for business. On the other hand, extremely aggressive rappers like Ice T and KRS-One were left behind this change.<sup>7</sup>

In 1998, Lauryn Hill made her first solo album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Listeners were fascinated with the musical diversity, and the album achieved the greatest success in the history of rap music.

Nevertheless, this album also resulted in making the boundary line between pop and rap unclear. The rhymes were written to emphasize Hill's intelligence and feminist attitude. The tunes were recorded in New York, London, Kingston, and other cities with many guest musicians and sound engineers. A large amount of money was spent for its production and advertisement. It satisfied all the requirements for a mega hit album as Michael Jackson's *Thriller*.

Around 2000, the early design of rap music had to be modified to have good sales among the crossover audience who had little relation to the inner-city life. Afro-American performers were respected for their social-mindedness, but to be too political or aggressive was an obstacle to their commercial success. Rap had to compromise so as to merge into the mainstream of popular music.

#### **G. Rap Rhymes and Social Justice: Summary**

[Musical Aspect]

The sound creation of early rap music started from sampling with additional rhythmic effects. It was easy to imitate or reproduce, so many young rappers appeared one after another. They performed further experiments in sound, and rap developed absorbing the elements of other styles of popular music.

[Literary Aspect]

In contrast to the simplicity in sound, the rhymes of rap were full of information. They were told basically in the Afro-American urban vernacular. They reflected all the life of Afro-Americans in the inner city. So rap rhymes could be a total message from the social minority.

[Cultural Evaluation]

The remarkable feature of rap music was its cultural diversity. In sound, rap

music promoted mixing many styles of popular music. In words, rap rhymes could be childish verbal plays, but also they could go beyond popular song lyrics and reach the social message to influence human attitudes.

[Political Situation]

If we point out an echo of the civil rights movement in soul and an echo of the post civil-rights activism in funk, we find an echo of the affirmative actions in rap music. The more progressive the political situation was, the more aggressive popular music became. The political change encouraged young rappers to express their Afro-American collective identity in public.

[Economic Growth]

Rap started as an urban cult music of Afro-American youths, and developed into an influential popular music in the world. It brought huge money to its performers, producers, promoters, and related companies. The wealth changed the design of early rap. Rap was standardized to merge into the mainstream of popular music.

[Social Influence]

Due to the political and economic backgrounds, rap increased its social position and influence. Many rappers wrote social-minded rhymes, and some of them committed themselves in social reform movements. Afro-American youths were encouraged to express what they thought, and the white majority also learned the reality of the inner city. Rap music made a contribution to realize an equal and cooperative society, or at least it was part of the movement.

## Notes

- 1 Generally the main elements of hip hop are MCing(rapping), DJing, breaking, and graffiti writing. I regard rap music as a mixture of words and sound, so I discuss MCing and DJing in the same context.
- 2 We find some important musical activities in the Harlem Renaissance. Jazz and the blues were very popular since the 1920s. Important musicians appeared one after another. From the present point of view, the music is the most remarkable cultural form in the Harlem Renaissance. But in those days, popular music was underestimated, so it was out of serious criticism. For example, when we read *The New Negro*, a collective of essays about the Harlem Renaissance, edited in the midst of the movement, we find only one essay on music. It surely deals with jazz, but the author did not give a positive evaluation on it. Jazz was highly evaluated after the arrival of Charlie Parker. The blues was also evaluated in the context of the Folk Revival. But at that time of the reevaluation, both the styles lost the power as popular music. Jazz was appreciated as an art and the blues as folklore. They were received by limited listeners, who mostly were well off in the city with high educational background.
- 3 We also find another example of political assertions in music. In the 1950s, some progressive jazz musicians like Charles Mingus and Max Roach composed tunes emphasizing their racial identity. Their activities encouraged the younger jazz players to

pursue their own music seriously. However, the sales of average jazz records were only a few thousand or less. Mingus had to establish his own record company, Candid, to produce the music without interference by white record company owners. They are probably very philosophical and political as we now give their works very high evaluation. But it cannot be called “popular” in terms of the social influence.

- 4 There was a non-verbal message in rap music. Young rappers in the 1980s like Run-D.M.C and L L Cool J showed their identities in costume as well as in rhymes. Gold accessories, baseball caps, and baggy shirts and pants they wore were the standard items for b-boys. Even though such items were usually the possessions of delinquents and mobsters, it was very important for b-boys to look tough and cool.
- 5 Male rappers were dominant over early rap. They often showed their machismo using dirty words to look down on women. Female rappers should cope with the prejudice in the Afro-American community as well as the discrimination in white America. So the rhymes of female rappers tended to highlight not the negative accusation but the positive suggestion.
- 6 Dub poetry is a new form of performance literature recited by the poet with rhythmic accompaniment. Its root is the Jamaican DJ style reggae music in the 1970s. The poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Lillian Allen emphasize their Jamaican (or Jamaican immigrant) identity and comment on social and political issues. Their expression media are not only books and magazines but records and CDs.
- 7 For Afro-American pop stars the key of their success depends on the reception among white consumers. Nat King Cole got a national popularity as a sweet crooner, and Aretha Franklin was widely accepted as a muse of the civil rights movement. It was very important for them to attenuate their racial identity and merge into white values. It is true that rap is a message from the social minority. However, we should remember that rap had the racial crossing aspect in the early stage. For example, Run-D.M.C. made the “Walk This Way” single and video (1986) with Aerosmith, a white rock band, and appealed to the white audience. The Beastie Boys, a white rap unit, sold their *Licensed to Ill* album (1986) over one million and became the first box-office star of Def Jam.