When the Sugarhill Gang released “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979, few people could have predicted that hip-hop and rap would become the most important music forces of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. “Rapper’s Delight” drew on trends that had originated in New York several years earlier. Brought to the United States by the Jamaican immigrant Kool Herc, and elaborated on by Grandmaster Flash, hip-hop started with disk jockeys “rapping” words in a rhymed and rhythmic patter. This practice of rapping over records was done live at parties and on radio programs before it was actually recorded and eventually released as a piece of music by the Sugarhill Gang. But rhythmic musical speech had been in existence for centuries. Furthermore, it was an integral part of African oral traditions, and had manifested itself in African-American culture in everything from black preaching and “signifying” to rhythm ‘n’ blues and funk. What made rap and hip-hop so powerful was that now this form of rhythmic speech and the sounds that provided the accompaniment, “spoke to” and became the voice of a whole generation. Although it had begun in the culture of young African Americans, it was soon embraced by youths of all races and ethnicities. The focus of the furor in the 2001 Grammy Awards, for example, was about the music of Eminem, who is white.

**Criticisms and Defenses of Rap**

What eventually made rap so incendiary was that many people, including many African Americans, did not like what was being said in one style of rapping, the extreme “hard core” or “gangsta” rapping. Rather than the fun, witty party lyrics initiated by the earliest rappers, the language of this style of rapping used obscenities, displayed racism, made violent and derisive remarks about homosexuals, promoted misogyny, and encouraged crimes, including murdering police. Parents feared that rap made ghetto life look attractive, luring impressionable middle-class youths into a ghetto fantasy in which they would adopt the values and attitudes of depraved street thugs. Critics voiced concern that the offensive language both glorified and incited violence. Its defenders said that this kind of rap simply described the harsh realities and problems that were (and still are) occurring in some segments of American society.
Others said that at least some of the lyrics were intended to be humorous.

Criticisms also focused on the music itself. As one writer said, “I think the phrase ‘rap music’ has replaced ‘jumbo shrimp’ as the ultimate oxymoron. Perhaps calling it street poetry would make sense, but to call it music is to refuse to acknowledge that the emperor has no clothes.”\(^1\) The “clothes,” of course, are “melody” and “instruments,” two of the traditional building blocks of music. Defenders responded by citing other examples in which these same structural characteristics were absent. Even in “classical” music, for example, there are no conventional melodies in percussion compositions or in the early-twentieth-century German opera technique of “Sprechstimme.” And in terms of instruments, using records as instruments was not so far removed from using synthesized sounds in other genres of contemporary electronic music.

Ultimately, hip-hop and rap have challenged conventional definitions of music, composition, and performance. Furthermore, their popularity represents a realignment of culture, race, and ethnicity in America. Rap, particularly, has given the formerly invisible underclass a loud and powerful voice. Even with the success and talent of other contemporary musicians and artists, it is clear that rap has continued to engage audiences and to speak for a generation of young people in a way that other pop styles have ceased to do. Hip-hop and rap music now have global appeal, and are being created by musicians from all over the world. One of the first tasks to better understand its popularity is to differentiate between the words “Hip-Hop” and “Rap.”

**Overview of Hip-Hop and Rap Music Traditions**

**Defining Hip-Hop and Rap**

**Hip-Hop Culture**

Hip-hop is the name for the culture of which rap is simply a part. Hip-hop culture initially had four main elements: emceeing (rapping), break dancing, graffiti art, and dj’ing. Eventually, it included the new styles of language and fashion that were popular among rappers and their fans.

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Rap

Rap is a vocal style of rhythmic speaking in rhyme. The voice is used as a percussive instrument while delivering messages in complicated verbal rhythms. The actual speaking is called "rapping," or "MC'ing." Early rap artists wanted their lyrics to be clearly understood, and the patter format seemed to achieve this clarity. Initially, rapping was simply chants and call-and-response rhymes over a DJ's manipulations of records. It became one aspect of a cultural phenomenon called "hip-hop," apparently from early rap lyrics such as "Say hip, hop, you don't stop."  

Hip-Hop as Background Music for Rap

"Hip-hop" was originally used to refer to the background music for rap. Several techniques developed to make this background music more interesting. For example, an early technique called "scratching," involved playing a record but changing the direction of rotation back and forth rapidly to create a rhythmic pulse. A variation was to use a second turntable to play the same record straight through while one scratched the record in a rhythmic counterclockwise on the first turntable. In addition to "scratching," another technique used multiple turntables to insert sections from one recording into another called "cutting." A related technique was to move between recordings, and if the recordings had different tempos or speeds, use a vari-speed control mechanism to maintain a beat pattern to blend the different songs. These are just some of the techniques that evolved to create the background music.

The first people to do this were disc jockeys, and so they used records that already existed. Early hip-hop artists maintained this practice of using existing records when they began to take excerpts, or "samples," from recordings to create the background for their raps. They would take these samples, and repeat them or combine them in different ways in a technique called "looping." Because many of the artists whose music was "sampled" viewed this as stealing, lawsuits ensued. Eventually, rap artists needed not only to acknowledge the sources from which they took their samples, but they also had to pay these sources royalties. This became expensive, so vocalists started to create completely new compositions to serve as their accompaniment. Drum machines, synthesizers, and computers provided the technology both to isolate precisely the samples from existing records and to generate new sounds and rhythms to create their music.

Hip-Hop as a Distinct Musical Style. Hip-hop also has been used to refer to the musical style in which a kind of patter-song vocal technique is used that is somewhere in between, or combines elements of, rapping and singing a melodic melody. Singers in this style also use an electronically-generated and highly rhythmic music texture as backup. As rap became more associated with social and political messages, hip-hop tended to maintain the earlier party atmosphere associated with reggae and the funk DJs who had initiated the style.

Stylistic Categories of Rap

Old School

This describes both the earliest hip-hop and rap recordings and current recordings that emulate the older styles that were created using two turntables and a microphone. It emphasizes simple beats, perhaps only a sampled bass line, and straightforward party rhymes. Kool Herc, Run DMC, and the Beastie Boys are the true Old

2 Light, Alan. "Rap and Soul: From the Eighties Onward," in The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll. p. 682. Although these words were used in other songs, they also were used in the first rap recording to make it on to radio charts, "Rapper's Delight."
4 The definitions and representative artists for Old School, Turntablism, and the various hip-hop subcategories were taken from Audiomag (http://www.audiomag.com) in 2005.
School, and Mos Def/Black Thought is an example of contemporary artists experimenting with the same kind of sound.

**Hard Core or Gangsta Rap**

Rather than "party lyrics," some rap vocalists began to rap more political lyrics, addressing issues of racism, life in ghettos, including drug use, injustice, gang warfare and street violence. Some rappers provoked serious controversy, such as Ice-T (Tracy Morrow) in his song "Cop Killer" (1992), that warned he would go out and "dust off" some cops, slitting a policeman's throat and watching his family mourn. As reprehensible as this sentiment is, it should be remembered that this was Ice-T's response to the highly publicized police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles, and the fact that these policemen were acquitted. Ice-T was from the same area, and he and other rappers had witnessed, experienced, and talked about police brutality for years. It was hard for him and others to accept that despite the video documentation of the beating, the police were found "not guilty of excessive violence."

The language of this more extreme style of rapping that focused on violence and rage in urban life also used obscenities, and sometimes displayed overt racism against other ethnic and racial minorities, such as Jews and Asians. Some rappers encouraged intolerance of homosexuals, and routinely referred to women as "bitches" or "hos" (whores). Many people condemned these rappers for their offensive language, which they feared promoted violence. For example, Black Women for Political Action were among many groups that pressured Time-Warner to sell the rap label under which Ice-T had recorded and distributed "Cop Killer."

**Turntablist or DJ**

Evolving from Kool Herc's original DJ-ing, Turntablist is "live" performance featuring the DJ and his or her turntables, sometimes in competition settings. Turntablists use scratchings, mixing, and transforming techniques to create unique combinations that may or may not include rapping. The earliest rap artists such as Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa were the original Turntablists, but more contemporary artists such as the X-ecutioners, Cut Chemist and Peanut Butter Wolf, and The Mixologists have maintained the basic style. Most Turntablists are musicians who, because their compositions are extemporaneous and not typically recorded, achieve national fame but are not part of the standard recording-based music industry.

**Independent or Underground Hip-Hop**

Analogous to Indie Rock, this genre includes artists who produce and distribute their music independently of the mainstream music industry. Released from industry pressures to create music that has wide audience appeal, these artists emphasize their resistance to compromise. Kool Keith, Latyrx, Mos Def, and Jurassic 5 are examples of Independent Hip-Hop.

**Bass and Southern Hip-Hop**

Developing out of the Electro Funk approach of Africa Bambaataa, Bass music is a club-based genre that features fast, bass-heavy dance music with chanted vocals that are highly sexual. This genre has been primarily centered in Miami and other areas of the Deep South and is represented by artists such as Quad City Djs, Magic Mike, and Tag Team. Southern Hip-Hop emphasizes a heavy bass line. Sometimes considered a derivative combination of Miami Bass and Gangsta Rap, it fuses the slow funk, bluesy feel of the former with the abrasiveness and intensity of the latter. Artists such as OutKast, Goodie Mob, and Dead Prez have been described as Southern Hip-Hop artists.

**Nonviolent and Pop Rap**

All rap is not gangsta rap focusing on violent subjects. In fact, some writers have suggested that one of rap's primary dangers is that it leads people to think that
all blacks, or all blacks living in ghettos, subscribe to the hard-core "gangsta" worldview. Illustrating this point is Afrika Bambaataa (Nathaniel Hall), one of the Bronx creators of hip-hop, who founded Bamm's Zulu Nation, today known as The Universal Zulu Nation. This international hip-hop movement promotes social activism and urges people to uphold principles of "knowledge, wisdom, understanding, freedom, justice, equality, peace, unity, love, and respect." Bam's rap lyrics celebrate the sense of brotherhood in the community, and the desire to build relationships with women that are based on shared love and mutual respect.

M. C. Hammer's rap "Help the Children" urged people to assist in efforts to improve the life of children in harsh urban environments. Artists recording under the general title "The Native Tongues Posse" used their lyrics to display pride in their African roots, and the songs stressed the optimism and unity that they experienced in black neighborhoods. Several rappers formed a coalition in 1989 to record "We're All in the Same Gang," which preached against violence. Even Tupac, who was a leader in gangsta rap and who lost his life to urban violence, rapped on a wide range of topics. His song "Dear Mama," for example, was a moving, tender testimonial to his love and respect for his mother, who as a single mother addicted to drugs, worked hard to create a loving family environment for Tupac and his sister. More recently, hip-hop that contains the fun and hooks but without the "danger" is described as Pop Rap, and includes some of the work of Coolio and Puff Daddy.

Rap also split into two geographically based styles: East Coast Rap and West Coast Rap.

**EAST COAST RAP**

The lyrics of rap artists on the East Coast tended to focus on racism against African-American communities, including the attitudes of police and government agencies. One of the earliest examples was Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's description of problems in the ghetto, called "The Message" (1982). In a later example, the lyrics of Public Enemy's "911 Is a Joke" (1990), described how calling 911 in an emergency is a cruel trick because the rescue squads don't care about people, especially those in African-American neighborhoods. Important East Coast rappers include Run-D.M.C., Public Enemy with Chuck D., LL Cool J, 2 Live Crew, and the late Notorious B.I.G.

**WEST COAST RAP**

On the West Coast, N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude), with their lead rapper, Ice Cube (O'Sheen Jackson), are credited with creating "gangsta rap" with their release in 1989 of *Straight Outta Compton*, produced by Dr. Dre. West Coast rappers focused on street violence and gang-related issues. The West Coast rapper who garnered a lot of attention was Tupac Shakur, with the record company Death Row. Shakur's style included vocals and more song style rapping. He also crossed over into film acting. His style popularized a form of rap that was aligned with the oral tradition of the black community, storytelling and signifying. Competition and hostility between artists on the rival coasts are said to have been the motive behind the shooting of Tupac in 1996.

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WOMEN RAPPERS

To some extent, in direct contrast to hard-core rap, women rappers such as Queen Latifah (Dana Owens) wrote from a woman's perspective, and talked about the importance of respect, community, and developing strength of character. In “Unity” (1993), she challenged, “Who you callin a bitch?” and urged women, “You gotta let ‘em know, you ain’t a bitch or a ‘ho.” The first successful female hip-hop group, Salt-N-Pepa, was a trio comprised of Salt (Cheryl James), Pepa (Sandy Denton), and DJ Spinderella (Dee Dee Roper). Their lighter approach and their almost “girl group” singing integrated with the rap puts them more in the genre of hip-hop. In 1999, Lauryn Hill was nominated for ten Grammy awards (she won five) for her hip-hop album The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill and was featured on the cover of the

February 1999 Time Magazine, which included an eleven-page cover story on hip-hop and rap.

RAP AND OTHER RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS

The popularity of rap extended to other ethnic and racial groups. In 1987, three white ex-punk musicians who called themselves the Beastie Boys released Licensed to Ill with the song “(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party!).” This song became a hit at parties and introduced the sound of hip-hop’s sampling techniques to a wide audience. Kid Frost, growing up in the Chicano community of Los Angeles, used his raps to address brutality against Chicanos. In his music, such as Hispanic Causing Panic (1990) and “Lowrider (on the Boulevard)” from Latin Alliance (1991), he used Latin rhythms and samples from Mexican-American musicians such as Santana. Musicians such as Molotov have continued Latino rap, often rapping in a mix-language dialect called “Spanglish.” Rap groups are also prominent in the international pop scene, such as Korean bands Noise, Rula, and Taiji Boys, and Haitian bands Zin and Top Vice.

In 2001, rap and hip-hop constituted almost 13 percent of all domestic sales in the United States, and there are many individuals and groups who have played, or currently play, an important role in its success from either a business or a musical perspective. Some examples of people or groups not yet mentioned include Sean “Puffy” Combs, Wu-Tang Clan, Snoop Doggy-Dog, EPMG, Sister Souljah, DMX, Sarah Jones, Blaque, and Roots.

RAP AND HIP-HOP IN A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Roots of Rap in African and African-American Oral Traditions

Rhymed and rhythmic speaking has always been an integral part of African-American cultures. For example, James Brown, the “Godfather of Soul” and the originator of funk, had used a speaking style on
message songs of the 1960s, including “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud.” Louis Jordan had used rhythmic speech in songs such as “Saturday Night Fish Fry” in the 1940s. Rhythmic and rhymed speech can be traced in a steady line from musicians in all genres of African-American music back through rhymed “signifying,” storytelling, preaching, and eventually back to the griots and paralinguists of traditional cultures in West Africa.

**Paralinguists and Griots**

At a West African king’s court, paralinguists were high-status poet-musicians who created poems that glorified rulers and ancestors or delivered the king’s commentaries to the tribe in witty, elegant language. These poems were often accompanied by drums and horns. The traveling poets, called griots, functioned in a similar manner among the villages. Griots were able to recite lengthy poems that recalled historical events and precise genealogies while they accompanied themselves on a variety of lute-style string instruments. West African cultures also maintained important prose tales that told stories involving human characters, or animal characters who represented humans. Plots often centered on the ability of the weak to outsmart the larger and meander antagonists, and these stories were retained by African Americans as allegories for the struggle between slaves and powerful white masters. Prose stories were frequently relayed in a rhymed monologue called a “toast,” and toasts thrived in the streets, army, prisons, and juke joints. These toasts sometimes turned up completely intact in various forms of African-American music, such as in James Brown’s “King Heroin” in 1972.7

**Syndesis**

Rap and hip-hop’s compositional technique of sampling is also seen as having African roots.

In West African cultures, the interaction between youth, elders, and ancestors was grounded in a process called syndesis. The syndetic approach encouraged descendents to respond to previous works of art by taking elements of those works and incorporating them into their new creations.8 This process is seen in instrumental “quotations” in both jazz and blues, and it is on some level also the basis of sampling. Furthermore, some scholars see the spirit of call-and-response in the syndetic approach, where young blacks honor their ancestors “call,” yet respond with their own contribution that brings ancestral wisdom into the current world but does not view that wisdom as final. Although rhythmic speech and syndesis can be seen in many forms of African-American culture, it has found its strongest and most sustained expression in hip-hop and rap.

**The Earliest Hip-Hop and Rap**

**KOOL HERC**

The “seeds” of hip-hop appear to have been planted in the United States in 1971, when the Bronx resident Cindy Campbell, who needed some back-to-school money, asked her brother Clive to throw a party for which people would pay admission.9 The siblings charged 25¢ for girls and 50¢ for boys. Held in the recreation room of their high-rise housing project, the party was a great success. Clive knew how to generate a party atmosphere. In his hometown of Kingston, Jamaica (in which he had grown up in the ghetto called “Trenchtown,” as did reggae artist Bob Marley), he had seen partiers hire DJs with big sound systems who would “toast” in a singsong voice before and at the beginning of each song, creating “dub poetry.” When he was thirteen years old and had moved to the

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9 An alternative “beginning,” as relayed in Alan Light’s *The Vibe History of Hip-Hop* (p. 14), says that this was a birthday party and that it did not occur until 1973.
LISTENING GUIDE “The Breaks”
Performing Artist: Kurtis Blow

Kurtis Blow (b. 1959) is one of the most influential of “old-school” hip-hop and rap artists, inspiring Run D.M.C., Whodini, and many other MCs who emerged in the 1980s. He grew up in Harlem and began his rapping career as early as 1976 in a club known as Charles Gallery. By 1977, he had acquired an inner-city fan cult that followed him in his ever-expanding club appearances. His first national exposure occurred in 1979 when he was one of the first rappers to record for a major label (Mercury). His broad-based popularity began with the release of his second single, “The Breaks,” in 1980. “The Breaks” moved to number four on the R&B singles chart, and was certified gold by RIAA. With the shift to more social commentary and gangsta rap in the later 1980s, Kurtis Blow’s style started to sound dated, but he is known as one of hip-hop’s most influential pioneers. In 1997, he contributed the liner notes to Rhino’s series “The History of Rap.” The lyrics to “These Are the Breaks” reflect the fun, party lyrics that predated “gangsta” and more socially critical lyrics.

Rhythm: Duple
Melody: Early sing-song, rhythmic speaking on pitch
Harmony: Simple, repetitive chords with pronounced bass line

Texture: Notice the call-and-response between Blow and the background chorus
Form: Series of repeated, rhymed phrases alternating with “that’s the breaks, that’s the breaks”
Instrumentation: Primary male voice, guitar, prominent bass line, drums, including steel drums and piano

United States, he focused his energies on building up his own sound system so that he could do the same DJ function. Because New Yorkers were not into reggae at this time, he used the funk records that were so popular with the young blacks and Hispanics of the Bronx area in which he lived. With the success of Cindy’s party, Clive went on to do more parties. In 1973, he gave his first block party, by this time using the moniker “Kool Herc.”

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10 “The Arts/Music/Hip-Hop Nation: Hip-Hop Nation There’s more to rap than just rhythms and rhymes.” Christopher John Farley with reporting by Melissa August/Atlanta, Leslie Everest/Atlanta, Laird Harrison/Oakland, Todd, 02-08-1999.
Herc had been expanding on his technique, for example, concentrating on the “break” segment of the song, which was the section in between vocal choruses and verses where just the instruments, especially the percussion, took over. Knowing the popularity of this part of the song with partners, he decided to use two copies of the same record on two different turntables and cut back and forth between them in order to make the break last longer. This produced the “breakbeat,” the sound that became the starting point for much hip-hop and later techno. The people who became his most serious devotees were the dancers who saved their best moves for the break section in the song, and it was through this that they became known as “break boys,” or simply “b-boys,” and the style became known as break dancing.

**Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa**

Grandmaster Flash (Joseph Saddler) had grown up in the Bronx and idolized Kool Herc. Like Herc, he had Jamaican roots, but he also had been tinkering with electronics as a student in a nearby vocational school. With this training, he constructed a cue monitor, which enabled him to hear one record through the headphones while the other was playing for the audience.

With this technological advantage, and the supreme hand-eye coordination that had earned him his nickname, he soon surpassed Herc in popularity. He and his crew also developed other technological innovations, including the technique of working the needle back and forth rhythmically that became known as “scratching.” Yet another modification was using multiple MCs (masters of ceremony, or microphone controllers) simultaneously to engage the crowd. Known as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the group interacted with each other rapping out catchphrases such as “Clap ya hands to the beat,” as well as rapping out complicated routines of back-to-back rhyming. Another early important DJ was Bronx DJ Afrika Bambaataa, with his crew of DJs called Zulu Nation. His record, “Planet Rock,” was one of the seminal presentations of scratching, electronic additions, high-tech beats, cutting rhythms, and highly processed vocals that became “hip-hop.”

By 1978, groups of MCs such as the Furious Five and Zulu Nation had become more popular than single DJs.

**The Cold Crush Brothers and the Sugar Hill Gang**

One of the Bronx groups that expanded on Grandmaster Flash’s approach was the Cold Crush Brothers, managed by Henry “Big Bank Hank” Jackson. Jackson also worked at a pizzeria in Englewood, New Jersey. One day, while rapping along to a Cold Crush tape, he was approached by Sylvia Robinson. Sylvia was a former rhythm ‘n’ blues singer who had several independent record labels that she ran with her husband, Joe. One of the labels was Sugar Hill, named after an area in Harlem that had been home to many black musicians, poets, and artists. Sylvia had become intrigued by rap, and asked Hank if he was interested in joining a group she was putting together. Although Hank had not been an MC himself, he agreed, and went back to the lead vocalist for the Crush Brothers, “Grandmaster Caz,” who helped him by giving him his book of rhymes. Over a rhythm track taken from a recent number one disco record called “Good Times” by Chic, Hank, and two other guys rapped Caz’s rhymes and recorded “Rapper’s Delight” as the Sugarhill Gang. It was “Rapper’s Delight” that was the immediate, commercial catalyst for subsequent recordings of hip-hop and rap.

**The Context for the Rise in Popularity of Rap**

**The End of Disco**

Rap music allowed young, urban New Yorkers to express themselves in an accessible art form that

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offered unlimited challenges. There were no
definite rules, it did not require purchasing and
learning how to play an instrument, and it did not
require an ability to sing. One had only to be origi-
nal and to be able to rhythmically rhyme. Rap
was also a response to disco, the music style that
dominated popular radio, and that to many young
urban blacks was a watered down and insipid ver-
sion of the soul and funk music that had been
popular in the 1960s. During the summer of
1979, anywhere from five to seven of the top ten
singles in America were disco. The genre became
overexposed, the market was saturated, and the
backlash began. When "Good Times" (the record
that provided the rhythm track for "Rapper's Delight")
debut in the Top Ten in July 1979, six of the other ten records were disco. When it
reached number one on August 1, only three
disco records remained in the Top Ten. By the
time it fell out of the Top Ten on September 22, no disco records remained and the press declared
that the disco era was dead. When "Good Times" fell out of the Top Forty in late October,"Rapper's Delight" was introduced and eventually
peaked at number four.

RETURN TO SEGREGATED RADIO
PROGRAMMING

The fast and dramatic death of disco had an impor-
tant impact on popular radio. Two charts for track-
ing record success had existed for some time:
Billboard's pop singles chart and the rhythm 'n'
blues chart. When "Rapper's Delight" was intro-
duced in 1979, nearly half of the records that were
popular across the country were found on both
charts. But by the first half of 1980, only 21 percent
were on both charts, and by 1982, the amount of
crossover was 17 percent. During a three-week period in October 1982, not one record by an
African American was on the Top Twenty of the
pop singles or albums charts, a polarization that had
not occurred since the 1940s. Programmers,

anxious to move away from anything that sounded
"disco," sought out alternatives, but from two
totally different recording repertoires. This new
wall between black and white music encouraged
rap to develop separately from the white main-
stream, produced by blacks for a black audience.

White kids were not listening to hip-hop,
and the sound was so foreign that when
Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five opened
for the English punk group Clash in New York
City in 1981, audience members who pelt them
with plastic cups drove them from the stage. In
the meantime, the Sugar Hill label continued to
release influential hip-hop hits (including many by
Grandmaster Flash) that rose to prominence on
the rhythm 'n' blues charts, leading larger labels to
search for and release their own competitive rap
recordings.

SHIFT IN RAP FROM PARTY MUSIC
to SOCIAL COMMENTARY

In 1982, Grandmaster Flash released "The
Message," which shifted rap to more social
commentary. The record described the desperation
and rage felt in the black community, where hopes
and dreams were reduced to efforts to survive:
"It's like a jungle, sometimes it makes me wonder,
How I keep from going under." The words also
described someone being sent to prison for 8
years, who is "used and abused" by his cellmates
until he commits suicide by hanging himself.
Sugar Hill did not initially want to release
"The Message," fearing that the departure from
the party image would be commercial suicide.
"The Message" did not make it at all on to
Billboard's Top Forty, but it soared to number four
on the rhythm 'n' blues charts and was honored as
"single of the year" in critics' polls for both the
Rolling Stone and Village Voice.

When Run D.M.C. released their first
album (1984), they continued the tradition of incis-
ive rhymes, delivered in a harder-edged manner.

13 ibid., p. 27.
with the backup music stripped to its essentials. Others followed their lead, and although some of these rappers were not from the ghetto, it soon became clear that being "real" and "hard" were the new values. Also founded in 1984, Def Jam records became a label that found great success with new artists. LL Cool J was the most prominent of this new group of rappers, and his performance of "I Can't Live Without My Radio" was sharp and spare. Used in the movie _Krush Groove_, LL Cool became the archetypal B-boy. Creating four platinum albums by 1991, and giving a searing performance backed by an acoustic band on _MTV Unplugged_, Cool became the first superstar of rap.

**Hip-Hop and Rap Become More Mainstream**

The hip-hop culture was steadily being brought to mainstream attention. Charlie Ahearn's 1982 film, _Wild Style_, showed break dancing, graffiti art, and the styles of language and fashion of the B-boys. Break dancing became a national fad and was shown in everything from television commercials to fashion magazines. But except for the anomalous "Rapture" by white new-wave group Blondie in 1980, rap music remained out of the mainstream until the late 1980s. The group largely responsible for rap's crossing over was Run D.M.C., who collaborated with the white group Aerosmith, to make a new version of Aerosmith's "Walk This Way" (1977). The song was released on their _Raising Hell_ album (1986), and became number four on the Billboard pop charts.

The white group Beastie Boys' party song, "(You Gotta) Fight for Your Right (to Party)," was even a greater success, and the first rap album to hit the top of the Billboard charts. Other rap hits followed, such as DJ Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince's lighthearted pop rap, "Parents Just Don't Understand" (1988). De La Soul's 3 _Feet High and Rising_ (1989) further broadened rap's base, as they sampled recordings by Steely Dan and Johnny Cash, and created lyrics that ranged from humorous absurdity to social commentary. Queen Latifah's _All Hail the Queen_ (1989) brought a woman's perspective into the genre. Fusion efforts uniting hip-hop beats with more traditional rhythm 'n' blues created Keith Sweat's "I Want Her" (1987) and Johnny Kemp's "Just Got Paid" (1988), both produced by Teddy Riley and given the name "New Jack Swing." This fusion style continued with Riley's own group in _My Prerogative_ (1989) and in the sound for Michael Jackson's _Dangerous_ (1991). The growing popularity of hip-hop and rap was also reflected in the 1985 founding of the hip-hop magazine, _The Source_, by two Harvard undergraduates. _The Source_ was the first of several publications that now cover the contemporary rap scene. In August 1989, the cable music video channel MTV debuted _Yo! MTV Raps_, which quickly became the station's most popular program.¹⁴

**The Growth of Hard-Core Rap**

Meanwhile, rap with a more political and social tone was evident in the high success of Public Enemy, who released _It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back_ (1988), and emphasized black nationalist pride. As this style of rap grew, and obscenities, rage, and violence characterized more of the lyrics, rap became more controversial. In 1989, N.W.A. (Niggaz with Attitude) released _Straight Outta Compton_, which contributed to the development of hard-core rap, referred to as "gangsta" rap. On that album, the track "Gangsta, Gangsta" began with gunshots. Another track on the album, "Fuck tha Police," attracted the attention of the FBI, who sent a letter of warning to the record company.

¹⁴ The success of _Yo! MTV Raps_ and music video in general led to marketing a recording that includes the production of a music video release as well. The rise of rap music videos opened a creative avenue of expression for black visual artists, set designers, and other technical staff. This has generated a body of technicians who are ultimately having an impact on black film production, which had been a nonexistent creative field for them and other black visual artists.
THE OBSCENITY TRIAL OF 2 LIVE CREW

The controversial element of rap was foregrounded in the national media with the 1990 obscenity trial of Miami's 2 Live Crew. The trial was sparked by the arrest of Charles Freeman, a record store owner in Florida, who was picked up for selling Crew's album, Nasty As They Wanna Be (1989). The album had been brought to the attention of a federal court judge in Fort Lauderdale earlier by an antiporn crusader from Miami, and the judge had pronounced the recording "obscene." This was particularly newsworthy, as this was the first time in the history of the United States that a federal court had set down such a ruling about a recording. The album was banned in Florida as well as in other states. Although Freeman was found guilty in trial, 2 Live Crew was acquitted. Sales of the album skyrocketed, and the group even celebrated the notoriety by naming their next album Banned in the U.S.A. (1990), which was a play on Bruce Springsteen's album Born in the U.S.A. (1984).

GANGSTA RAP BECOMES MAINSTREAM

Mainstream America was becoming more and more aware of rap, but primarily of the extreme, high-profile gangsta rap. It also was clear that this was the kind of rap that was achieving great commercial success. In 1991, N.W.A.'s second album, the searing, violent, and misogynistic Efil4zaggin' ("Niggaz 4 Life" backward) entered Billboard's pop chart at number two. This was followed four months later by similarly successful Public Enemy's Apocalypse 91: The Enemy Strikes Black, and Ice Cube's solo album Death Certificate, which also debuted in the number two slot. Another hard-core rap CD, Snoop Doggy Dogg's Doggystyle, immediately rocketed to the number one spot on the charts (1993).

Critics became alarmed, stressing that not only was this type of rap focusing almost exclusively on pathologies within American culture, particularly black ghetto communities, but also that it was glorifying ghetto life and inciting violence. Albums with sexually explicit or violent lyrics were required to post a "Parental Warning" logo on the CD covers. Despite of (or because of) attempts to curtail it throughout the 1990s, hardcore gangsta rap continued to increase in popularity. In the words of one writer, "after the smoke clears, gangsta rap will be identified as the most influential style in all of pop music in the '90s."

Real-life violence overshadowed recorded violence when, in 1996, "West Coast" superstar Tupac Shakur was murdered by gunmen in Las Vegas. Then, in 1997, "East Coast's" Notorious B.I.G. was shot as well. As much of the rap world was stunned by these losses, and criticism intensified on the dangers of hard core rap, Sean "Puffy" Combs renewed his commitment to maintaining it: "We can't let this music die." In 1997, with his Beats by the Pound production associates, he began a prolific series of CDs containing tunes made for consumers now known as "No Limit" fans.

RAP AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

In 1998, rap became America's top-selling musical format, selling more than eighty-one million CDs, tapes, and albums and increasing by a stunning 31 percent from 1997 to 1998. This percentage can best be appreciated when rap is compared with country music, previously the fastest growing format, which in the same period grew by only 2 percent. Increase in the music industry as a whole was only 9 percent. Furthermore, even though hip-hop and rap were genres started in black America, in 1999 whites purchased 70 percent of hip-hop albums. In the first year of the new millennium, rap accounted for 12.9 percent of all domestic record sales.

18 "The ArtsMusic/Hip-Hop Nation: Hip-Hop Nation There's more to rap than just rhythms and rhymes." Christopher John Farley with reporting by Melissa August/Atlanta, Leslie Everett/Atlanta, Laird Harrison/Oakland, Todd, 02-08-1999.
The 2001 Hip-Hop Summit

In 2001, music executive Russell Simmons, one of the cofounders of the Def Jam hip-hop and rap empire, announced a “Hip-Hop Summit.” He invited major artists, recording industry insiders and executives, members of Congress, academics, civil rights groups, and the leader of the Nation of Islam, asking them to return to rap’s roots. City of New York, to discuss a variety of issues. For over two days, people talked about getting artists and the entertainment industry “to take responsibility for

LL Cool J in 1997, was one of the most successful rap artists to come out of the Def Jam record label. Source: Black Bear Productions, Inc. By Wayne Maser. Courtesy Black Bear Productions, Inc. By Wayne Maser/Starfish Management.

themselves,” to establish mechanisms for conflict resolution among artists, and to closely examine artist development and marketing in order to identify strategies to “elevate the art form.”

Minister Farrakhan addressed the gathering for two hours, urging artists to harness their power to more enlightened lyrical expressions to combat injustice, racism, and exploitation. He also challenged critics to reach out to artists and help change the conditions that “spawn offensive lyrics.” Martin Luther King III exhorted attendees that it was time for the hip-hop community, civil rights activists, and the business community “to come together to forge an agenda to move the nation forward.”

CONCLUSION

The twentieth century was enriched extraordinarily by the music contributions of African Americans. It is almost impossible to imagine what music would be like without spirituals, jazz, Gospel, blues, and rhythm ‘n’ blues. Now, added to this list, are hip-hop and rap. These latter styles, particularly, will certainly frame our memories of the last decades of the twentieth century. Began three decades ago, an entire generation of American youth—blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans—has grown up immersed in the hip-hop culture. Doug Century, who has studied the hip-hop culture, has predicted that white acts will eventually dominate rap, just as white musicians have eventually dominated other black musics. “It’s possible that in fifteen years, all hip-hop will be white.” By contrast, American culture is in a constant process of reinvention. Just as it was impossible to predict the ultimate growth and popularity of hip-hop and rap when “Rapper’s Delight” first appeared on the national pop charts in 1979, we most likely will be amazed when we look back sometime in the future, to see how the youth culture has, once again, transformed itself and its music.

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