The Rise and Fall of Hip-Hop

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Abstract

Early Hip-Hop and its origins are discussed in reference to their role and response to society, first on the east coast and later in the west. The Gangster Rap phenomenon is evaluated to understand how unexpectedly, depiction of a violent lifestyle helped make Hip-Hop a palatable commodity. Finally, The process of commodification is examined as it takes advantage of the unrest and hate within American society…

1 Intro

I never listened to Hip-Hop until I was 12, 1995, years after much of what I am writing about had happened. However, through the influence of a couple older friends and their brothers I was taught to appreciate the rap of the 80’s and early 90’s. I witnessed and took part in the later years of Hip-Hop’s ‘coming of age’ and its most glaring examples of commodity. I don’t consider myself a Hip-Hop purist, I am not old school or new school, however, I spent many years emulating African Americans criminals and often associated with the murder and rape they talked about. I didn’t know why I liked listening to it, we never asked questions like that.

Now I strive to look back and understand some of the music and culture that shaped my self-image and that of many of my friends. Why did certain types of Hip-Hop survive while others fell out of popularity? Why did Hip-Hop take hold and what did it represent? I look at the rhetoric of a select few representatives that each draw widely varying pictures of the world and ways to respond to it. Finally, I look at how commodification molded Hip-Hop it into a rather unexpected sedative.
2 A Brief History of Hip-Hop

In 1979, Sugar Hill records released a single by the Sugarhill Gang titled “Rapper’s Delight”.

“I said a hip, hop, the hippie, the hipidipit, hip, hip, hopit, you don’t stop”

This was the first popular hip-hop song, selling over 2 million copies. This was 1979 [3]. I always feel it necessary to justify Hip-Hop’s importance when speaking to people born before 1975. Hip-Hop had been developing through the 70’s, but did not become “big” or famous until the late 70’s and early 80’s. Today, over 25 years later, it is bigger than ever, and has become the definitive party music for all generations born after 1980... 25 years and rising. This first struck me as strange while I was listening to a lecture on the development of Jazz music. The lecturer was going over how each form of early jazz: rag time, swing, bop, etc... fell out of popularity within about 10 years and was replaced by a reactionary new style. Consider that less than 15 years passed between Elvis’s first single and Woodstock! Why is Hip-Hop still cool, why hasn’t it gone out of style? And how did white suburbia become the biggest consumer of a music that developed as an expression of Afro-American and latino culture in impoverished areas of New York City?

To answer these questions we must understand what and who Hip-Hop was. Hip-Hop has become a symbol of youth and rebellion. And in turn, a convenient medium for much rhetoric. Strangely enough, this rhetoric has covered a wide spectrum of views pertaining to most arguments, and is very often at odds with itself. Where does this all come from?

2.1 Old School: 70s and Early DJs

1973, a girl is having a birthday party at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the West Bronx. Her brother Clive Campbell, an especially large Jamaican man, is running the sound system. Harkening back to the style of massive mobile sound systems back in native Jamaica, he plays different party music back-to-back while speaking in between tracks [3]. This was DJ Kool Herc, or “Hercules” as he was called for his athletic abilities. DJ Kool Herc found that the “break down”, percussion heavy parts of old funk songs were especially
stimulating to the crowds, throwing them into a frenzy. So he tried to extend this section of the song, and hold the crowd in this state. He would line up two of the same record connected to the same sound system, then when the song hit the break-down, he would “cut” or switch back and forth between the two records, spinning one to a certain section while the other played, or even playing different parts of the climax in unison. Over time, when Kool Herc played at block parties, the crowd began to expect the “break-down” and good dancers would save their best moves for this section. Enter the break dancers, break boys or B-boys for short. These dancers expressed the frenzy by throwing their bodies into cyclones, doing flips, and spinning on their heads or moving like a robot to the electronic beats [2, 4].

DJ Kool Herc wasn’t the only DJ making a stir in the Bronx. In the 70’s a man born Kevin Donovan, now called Afrika Bambaataa, started a gang in the South Bronx. The gang, the Black Spades, grew to be the biggest in the bronx area. During a trip to Africa he was inspired, by stories of Zulu warriors, to organize his gang in the Bronx to support the African community. Called “Zulu Nation”, the group comprised mostly of racially/politically charged gang members and artists, started block parties and other community activities to get their message out. Zulu nation used graffiti art, music, and dancing to push their ideals. Afrika Bambaattaa organized the first hip-hop tour of Europe in 1982, bringing graffiti artists and break dancers across Europe [3].

Hip-Hop was moving out of the Bronx, and would spend the next decade spreading into every corner of the US and beyond, but not without a lot of resistance, hate, death, and selling out...

2.2 Golden Age: the 80s

Many people define the “Golden Age” of rap as the period beginning with Run-DMC’s Rasing Hell CD (becoming famous in 1986) until the rise of “Gangster Rap”, often symbolized by the large success of Dr. Dre’s album “The Chronic”. Apart from technical definition, the general idea is that in the late 80s and into the early 90s, Hip-Hop was being discovered by an increasing number of people, as well as developing and changing rapidly.

In 1983 Run-DMC’s “Sucker MCs” was played on WBLs’s Mr. Magik Rap Attack radio show. It boomed! just one hard drum machine beat and a couple guys yelling over it... no singing - just shouts. Three years later, Run-DMC’s release of Reigning Hell brought the single “Peter Piper”, witty
rhymes that mixed traditional sayings and nursery rhymes with urban topics and slang. The beats had gotten harder, more beats, more break-down. Previous rap groups had mostly sampled old funk tunes along with some scratching and cutting between the two. Run-DMC had brought original dry beats, that were developed along with their raps. Their raps were loud and clear, and bounced with the beat. Songs like “Peter Piper” are at the core of what is referred to as the “Golden Age” of Hip-Hop. The music didn’t make much sense to the rest of the world, it was for the younger urban crowd, a unique expression that was all theirs, a dry platform for feelings and ideas to be communicated [3].

This new medium was also being utilized by a growing number of racially charged hip-hop groups, like A Tribe Called Quest and Public Enemy. These groups helped to the push African-American interest into the public mind. They spoke out explicitly and directly about inequality and racism. Their passion often came across in a very militant manner and many within these groups were connected with certain militant groups. However, their battle was a battle words and not guns, a major difference that separates the politically/racially charged rappers of the later “Golden Age” from those rappers associated with the rise of Gangster Rap.

An aspect I notice about this era of Rap was the novelty taken towards very simple aspects of Hip-Hop life. For instance, A Tribe Called Quest’s song “Skypager”, with lines such as:

“Do you know the importance of a SKYYY-PAY-GER?!”
“Conceptually, a pager is so complex”
“The batteries I use are called du-ra-cell!
They last for three weeks so they do me well”

Looking back, these details seem rather insignificant and cheesy. However, consider that the emphasis placed by modern Hip-Hop on “spinners” (spinning rims on your car wheels) and “Grillz” (diamonds or other jewelry on your teeth) is probably a modern equivalent. The main difference between nowadays and the late Golden age is the freedom the artists had in depicting these objects. The image of cool was very dynamic, and very intangible. A song by De La Soul about picking up girls at the local Burger King (“Bit-ties at the BK Lounge”) was seen as very cool and pushed the BK Lounge joke into the public language. Why? Because they did it in a confident
manner, self-confidence was allowed to form art any way it wished. Today, every rapper has to talk ghetto, must definitelty have lots of “Bling” (Cars, Jewelry, clothes, etc...) and should have a very aggressive/angry attitude towards life and sex. However, consider 80′s songs like the N.W.A. (Niggas with Attitude) song “I ain’t the one”, in which they emphasize their lousy transportation, saying “I tell her ‘girl!’ I drive a BUCKET!”

The hard core image had not taken over hip-hop music yet, rappers could be jokers, poets, revolutionaries, romantics, or gangsters. This freedom would slowly slide away with the rise of Gangster Rap.

2.3 Gangster Rap: the 90s

Do you swear to tell the truth the whole truth and nothin but the truth so help your black ass? Why don’t you tell everybody what the fuck you gotta say?

Fuck tha police Comin straight from the underground
Young nigga got it bad cuz I’m brown
And not the other color so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority

Gangster rap didn’t start in the 90s, N.W.A. had been singing “Fuck the Police” throughout the 80s, but it was in the 90s that this aggressive and rather simplistic sub-genre became the first and foremost representative of hip-hop. N.W.A. defined west coast rap by the end of the 80s and three of its members would become some of the biggest solo artists in west coast rap in the 90s. Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, and Eazy-E all came out of N.W.A. While, it is apparent that no one in the group, except possibly Eazy-E, could actually be considered a gangster, they did draw attention to ghetto conditions in south-central Los Angeles (Compton in particular). The first few songs of the album Straight Outta’ Compton caused quite a commotion, even prompting Milt Ahlerich, an assistant director of the FBI, to send a letter to Ruthless Records and its parent company Priority, advising the rappers that the law enforcement took “exception to such action (fucking the police)” [11].

Straight Outta’ Compton was one of the albums that prompted the ‘parental advisory’ label scheme. However, in an interesting twist of fate, with changes in public perception (due to albums like Straight Outta’ Compton) a copy purchased today displays merely “WARNING MODERATE: impact coarse language and/or theme” [11]. While on the subject, Rolling Stone
magazine recently placed this album 144th on their list of the 500 greatest albums of all time - old garde gangster rap, hmmmm...

Gangster rap came of age with the wide scale acceptance of Dr. Dre’s album “The Chronic” (Chronic is a name for decent street weed/pot). “The Chronic” helped to launch the careers of Warren G, Nate Dogg, and Snoop Dogg - another rapper associated with west-coast gangster rap [7]. The album was a milestone for “G-Funk”, a type of hip-hop that involves slow base-beats and slurred delivery (classic Snoop Dogg). This G-Funk style of Gangster Rap would become the most popular type of rap in the early 90s (some of it produced under Dre’s Death Row Records). While on the subject, The Chronic is ranked 137th on Rolling Stone’s list of The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time [7].

Gangster Rap was defined by N.W.A. and popularized by Dr. Dre and Death Row Records. But Gangsta’ Rap would climax with the conflict between east coast rapper The Notorious B.I.G. (Biggie Smalls) and Death Row Records west coast rapper 2Pac. Tupac, who originally was born in New York City and moved to Los Angeles later in life, is listed by some as the highest selling Hip-Hop rapper ever, having sold 73 million albums worldwide [13].

Notorious BIG (a.k.a. Biggie Smalls) was a rapper for Bad Boy Records, known for his smooth rhymes that glorified big living and big riches. His laid-back bigger-than-life image has been copied by countless rappers in the last 10 years. The two rappers had collaborated many times and even performed together in 1994 at Madison Square Gardens. However that all came to an end on November 30th of the same year. Tupac Shakur was shot 5 times, and later accused Biggie of organizing, or at least having foreknowledge of the shooting. Shakur felt that the lyrics to Biggie’s song “Who Shot Ya’?” were a disrespect to him, having been shot right before the song was released. Tupac was sentenced to 4 years in prison for sexual abuse the day after the shooting. After spending 11 months in jail, he formed the Outlawz and wrote a song “Hit ’Em Up”, in which he attacked Notorious BIG and claimed to have slept with Biggie’s current wife [10].

On September 7th, 1994, after leaving a boxing match in Las Vegas, while stopped at an intersection, another car pulled up alongside and shot Tupac four times. He died six days later. Southside Crips have been considered the most likely culprits, while there has also been some evidence in interviews that Biggie had been connected with certain southside Crips, at least offering money for Tupac’s death [13]. However, on March 9th, 1997, before this
evidence had surfaced, Biggie Smalls was shot six times while waiting at a red light, killing him instantly. Still unsolved, most evidence has pointed towards members of Death Row Records connected with Tupac. There also has been implications that certain members of the LAPD were involved with a Death Row Records plot [10].

The claims that Tupac and Biggie were in one way or another responsible for each other’s deaths has very little to do with the effect that these events had on hip-hop’s perception and effect in the population. These Gangsters who sang about living rich and “going out shooting” were actually making millions and turning up dead on the front of the newspaper. Their albums were at number one on the charts while they were serving prison sentences. These rappers were actual criminals and that seemed to give some legitimacy to the art. Hip-Hop was about 15 years old now and had just gained huge appeal throughout the United States. And somehow, with all this money going around, the rappers were seemingly more real than ever... legit, poetic, and living out their lyrics. Gangster rap rejuvenated hip-hop’s legit/real feel, ensuring that the people that wrote and performed the lyrics were living lives as hard or worse than your own. And that because they communicated this to the world, they deserved to live large. The idea was that there had always been certain hip-hop artists that represented the legitimate struggles and feelings of the youth and minorities. There is always a few rappers that ensure a sense of legitimacy, and it is this force that has continually rejuvenated Hip-Hop throughout the ages. Somebody has to keep it real now and again, Biggie and Tupac died, this sacrifice ensured hip-hop would have a legit record for the next generation. And the next generation embraced hip-hop more universally than their big brothers, or even their big-big brothers.

2.4 Clubs, Bling, and Booty: the O0’s

The late 90’s to the present can be seen as a time in which Hip-Hop became a very mature style, with hundreds of sub-genres and no one genre dominating all the others. Like modern Jazz and Rock, it has become diverse and hard to discreetly define or explain. There are fusion styles everywhere, techno uses old hip-hop tunes on a regular basis. You can find Rap-Rock and Jazz-Rap played on the radio. Most pop songs now have breakdown sections and bass beats reminiscent of the same percussion-heavy style used in early Hip-Hop. Listen to the beats in songs by Britney Spears and N’Sync to see how average pop songs incorporate modern versions of old funk beats. What defines or
uniquely describes Hip-Hop nowadays? Well, not much of anything I guess... So, to answer the question that was bugging me, while I was listening to the jazz lecture... “Why has Hip-Hop stayed around so long?” - because Hip-Hop is now completely absorbed into society and media, and because Hip-Hop has gained some kind of dangerous or legit image that has been resilient against changing trends and rather marketable among youth. The modern state of Hip-Hop art may or may not have anything to do with the cultural movement that started in the Bronx in the 1970’s, but there is a marketable idea that is Hip-Hop, one created in society by 20 years of poets, revolutionaries, and gangsters.

In spite of Hip-Hop’s ubiquity in modern pop culture, there are a few identifiable, new styles that deserve mention. One of note is the southern off-shoot of rap. Centered around certain southern US cities, Southern Rap was represented in the early 90s by 2 Live Crew and their very “nasty” lyrics, basically just consisting of detailing sexual acts. This style then turned into “Dirty South” Hip-Hop, including rappers like Ludacris and Bubba Sparxxx. This style had big beats and the rappers didn’t just slur words, but even sounded like they were “spitting” (which is an extremely common slang word for rapping). A section of dirty-south rap, “Crunk”, has recently gained widespread popularity, in large part, due to rapper Lil’ Jon. Lil’ Jon’s Crunk is probably the best example of club-centered dance Hip-Hop. It is interesting to contrast Lil’ Jon’s lyrics and beat to that of Run-DMC. Run-DMC, consisting of a few guys yelling their poetry over a dry bass line, could not be more stylistically further from Crunk, which takes the screaming and big bass to the extreme. Crunk lyrics are often focused around a few key words (‘What’, ‘Yeah’, ‘Shit’) and proceed to repeat these over and over again. Many who consider themselves Hip-Hop purists will point to Crunk lyrics as an example of much of the rap/hip-hop art has been lost to the, now popular, “gangster” or “hard-core” image. Consider these choice lyrics from the song “What you Gon’ Do?” by Lil’ Jon and the Eastside Boyz:

[Chorus]
If you roll up in the club and them niggas wanna mug
When you step up to they face what they gon’ do? SHIT!
If you roll up in the club and them hoes start actin’ up
When you step up to them hoes what they gon’ do? SHIT!
What they gon’ do? SHIT! [Repeat 8X]
[Repeat 4X]
It’s some East-side niggas and they deep in this bitch
and they step the ever nigga that be talkin that shit

[Repeat 2X]
Only bitches’ talk shit (What)
Only bitches’ talk shit (What)
Only bitches talk shit
that’s why we bustin’ yo shit

[Repeat 4X]
We real niggas (what)
ya’ll hoes (ya’ll hoes)

Know that this song is hugely popular, and played all the time in clubs. To be honest, I love listening to this... “shit”, but I hate the idea of it, and that does not make much sense. There must be something deep inside my generation’s culture that causes us to love this dirty, nasty music. Keep this in mind...

The Rise of Reggaeton can be seen to have both positive and negative implications for the future of Hip-Hop art. Reggaeton developed out in Panama, and then came into its own in the 90s, in the Dominican Republic. Reggaeton is most easily identified by its uniquely styled bass beats. The beat is called “Dem Bow” (after a song), and is based on Trinidadian Soca Music. The rise of Reggaeton and other latin/fusion music in the US seems rather unsurprising, considering the rise in Latino population and its effect on the general culture of the US. As with anything now days, the music style is not necessarily Hip-Hop. However, It has been adopted by the Hip-Hop crowd. It is played on Hip-Hop stations and Reggaeton artists regularly collaborate with well known Hip-Hop artists. Reggaeton is pushing Hip-Hop to include more complex rhythms and influences from around the Spanish speaking world. How could this be considered negative? From a lyrical standpoint, many of the most famous Reggaeton songs are simply one long string innuendos. Whether it’s a shark or gasoline that they are filling a girl with, the idea is all the same. This does not apply to all Reggaeton and some artists are completely free of such lyrics, however this image of Reggaeton is rapidly taking hold. Most major cities in America now have radio stations
dedicated to Reggaeton. These stations are usually bi-lingual (DJs must be) and both mainstream English Hip-Hop and Reggaeton are played alongside more traditional Latino styles. Barrio Fino, Luny Tunes, and Don Omar have helped make this style very popular in the US and Europe [12].

3 Spectacle & Rhetoric

Considering the general flow of Hip-Hop from the late 70's through the present, I will present the rhetoric and notable actions of the Hip-Hop art at different states. The representatives I choose to cover do not represent a complete or un-biased sample of the art. I don’t believe I am capable of defending any such selection. However, each of these characters help me explain a facet of what I see as Hip-Hop. And through these stories, one can understand how I see Hip-Hop flowing from counterculture to mass market pacifier. The following is an unjustified set of landmarks in the history of Hip-Hop.

3.1 Public Enemy and Chuck D: Fight The Power!

Chuck D often came across angry, and he usually was. He was aware of the game, the tendency of society to pacify the black man. Rather than questioning society... or attempting to expose this trend, he builds moments of frustration. As observed in the song “Fight the Power” from the album “Fear of a Black Planet”:

Elvis was a hero to most
But he never meant shit to me
you see Straight up racist
that sucker was Simple and plain
Mother fuck him and John Wayne
Cause I’m Black and I’m proud

In other songs, such as “911 is a Joke” Chuck D points the finger at many institutions in society that are accused of racism or just being bad in general. His solution was somewhere beyond American politics, Chuck D felt that Africa was the future for his people, he supported a return to this past culture for African Americans. He was an outspoken defender of many African Americans who he felt were being targeted because of their race and
he supported Black communities. Encouraging others to support blacks in hiring and looking for black legal and political representees [1].

Chuck D felt that the rise of Gangster Rap was incredibly ridiculous, specifically the “glorification in videos and in the news as being a phenomenon for white folks’ entertainment, while real brothers were killing each other all over the map” [1]. The idea that black people killing each other is marketable in America was seen as a clear sign of the racism throughout society. “The murder of Black people has been packaged, marketed, sold, and accepted to be an effective strategy in the implementation of our genocide while large corporations and the government benefit off of our demise” - Chuck D [1].

Chuck D is not alone in pointing to Gangster rap as being responsible for giving rap its violent image. Many other rappers and observers have noted how Gangster Rap effectively stole Hip-Hop’s nature as a medium for African American perspective. Hip-Hop turned into a music that only emphasized the sex, drugs, and violence associated with some idea of urban culture. This early 90’s idea of Hip-Hop seems to have been more commodifiable than the communication medium Hip-Hop was in the 80s. This point is the key to explaining why the offensive messages of Gangster Rap and the Dirty South became popular, while the politically and racially charged messages of the late Golden Age (1980’s), were doomed to survive mostly in the minds of has-been’s and urban nostalgia. As long as rappers sing about hate, sex, and killing each other they remain relatively useless for political or economic change. The spectacle is effectively isolated to pop culture. And anyways... who listens to Chuck D anymore?

3.2 Gang-Starr

Keepin’ it real in B-R-double-O-K-lyn. Gang-Starr was daily-rapper-activity-rhetoric. Guru, the main lyricist, told a story that was down to earth, in touch with reality, but always hoping for the best. The reality was, it wasn’t worth getting a 9-to-5, Gang-Starr wasn’t hoping for a suit job. The “no future” message of the Sex Pistols, was repeated with a strange twist. Instead of speaking out of a society that closes its eyes to the trash and hopelessness around them, the African American society, from which Gang-Starr came, was well aware of the negatives barriers and obstacles in their lives. The element lacking enough strong voices was one of positive solutions. Gang Starr felt that people need to do whatever it takes to make the money, to get along in life. In the song F.A.L.A. (Fuck Around Lay Around) he says
“Word to Joe Frazier, got ta do what pays ya” and the chorus implies that you have to “do or die”. You can’t “fuck around, lay around” all the time, or you want find your ends. In the song “Alongwaytogo”, Guru states “It’s like a jungle sometimes. You get the message? You got to rumble sometimes, it’s gettin hectic”. This pre-ganster style message implied that violence is sometimes reality, but far from glorified, rather the focus was on the will to overcome whatever in all ways necessary. The reality of violence is played out in the song “Tons of Guns”, a warning to all to be careful in what they do and watch their step, because “everyone’s gettin strapped”. The idea was that there was no future in the traditional system, rather, one was often required to go outside and beyond the current system and its laws [9].

While being honest about the no-future situation within the law and traditional success mediums, Gang Starr is far from a pessimist. His lyrics are hopeful and proud. In “Code of the Streets” Guru starts out explaining how kids start into crime for fun and are then pushed into violence. However, he then goes on to talk about the skills necessary to rise above this downward spiral (i.e. the code of the streets). The struggle of people on the streets is summed up in this same song:

It’s the code of the streets
They might say we’re a menace to society
But at the same time I say Why is it me?
Am I the target, for destruction?
What about the system, and total corruption?
I can’t work at no fast-food joint
I got some talent, so don’t you get my point?
I’ll organize some brothers and get some crazy loot
Selling D-R-U-G-S and clocking dollars, troop
Cause the phat dough, yo, that suits me fine
I gotta have it so I can leave behind
The mad poverty, never having always needing

I gotta get mine, I can’t take no shorts

This music was real, clear, and discussed solutions to the problems on the streets. Were the solutions legal or easy? or just reality? Do what you can to get your loot and get out of the hell hole that is the system you born into. Members of Gang Starr found their own ways to meet ends, Guru used
poetry and DJ premier used his musical skillz to make beats. The reaction to the conditions? Find a way to get the money any way possible, even drugs, or violence...

3.3 The Spectacle of Gangsta’ Rap

Protected by niggaz wit big dicks, A.K.’s, and 187 skills

Blunts, 40’s and Bitches - The Gangsters told stories about fighting with cops, doing drugs, and fucking big ass girls. It’s the same old gangster stories all over again, with an African-American or modern-urban twist. Death Row Records artists claimed to represent the gang life in south-central Los Angeles, the sane response to the reality on the streets. And if you ain’t at the top of this gang solution, you ain’t shit. (interesting phrase, since saying someone ‘is shit’ and ‘ain’t shit’ basically means the same thing, but if you are ‘the shit’ then... well, that’s the opposite).

3.3.1 Dr. Dre

The anarchy of the LA riots in early 1992 was glorified in the Dr. Dre song “The Day the Niggaz Took Over”:

They wonder why me ballin’ and don’t really understand
The reason why they take me life and me hand
Me not out for peace and me not Rodney King
Me gun goes click, me gun goes bang
Them riot in Compton and them riot in Long Beach
Them riot in they Lakers and don’t really wanna see
niggaz start to loot and police start to shoot
Lock it down at seven o’clock, then again it’s like Beirut
Me don’t show no love cuz it’s us against them

Like my niggaz from South Central, Los Angeles
They find that they couldn’t handle us
Bloods, Crips on the same squad with the Uzi’s thumpin,
nigga it’s time ta rob and mob
(And break the white man off somthin lovely, biddy-bye-bye
I don’t love ’dem so they can’t love me)
The power derived from gangs was hailed as the only legit solution to Black oppression. Early 90’s Hip-Hop saw direct confrontation with the law became rhetoric a la mode. Blacks against whites, fighting against the police. Each black man needed a gun, and should sell drugs to make his money. This wasn’t a hidden message, these were clear words, voiced over and over in every song. And the most interesting aspect of this trend in Hip-Hop rhetoric was that this message was accepted very readily by the nation. Sure it was touted by some leaders as a sign of moral degradation in society and such, but who really listens to that kind of whining anyway? White kids in every major city were buying the records as fast as they could be made. Memorizing the lyrics, singing them, emulating the image. Upper-middle class suburban white kids were pretending to be impoverished African-American criminals. And their baby-boom parents figured it was just a teenager thing. MTV showed all the videos, this stuff wasn’t being rejected, it was being embraced by the society. This message of violence was a wish come true for the political and economic institutions whether they knew it or not. Finally, Hip-Hop was producing a message that had no real impact, that was both serving consumer practices and ameliorating the insecurities of suburban society. Allowing black men to sing about killing each other, was an exercise in African-American free speech and gave the “other” people in society a sense of well-being. The white man’s catharsis was to let the black men sing about being violent gangsters. Very strange... kind of sick or something.

3.3.2 Tupac and Biggie

Biggie, the romantic, lived life big. Tupac, the poet, always seemed frustrated and dreaming of something better.

Notorious B.I.G. was born Christopher Wallace in Brooklyn, his dad left when he was a baby, and he dropped out of high school to sell drugs, for which he served 10 months in jail. After getting out of jail, he was talked into trying rap as a way to possibly support his new baby without selling drugs. His blues-esque deep voice, which amplified his lyrics legitimacy, garnered him quick acclaim. Most of his rap is spent telling stories above chill beats. His stories mostly covered daily struggles, witty sayings, and descriptions of the big life, the latter two epitomized in his song “Big Poppa”.

[chorus]
(I love it when you call me Big Pop-pa)
Throw your hands in the air, if you’s a true player
To the honies gettin money playin niggaz like dummies

If you got a gun up in your waist please don’t shoot up the place

Cause I see some ladies tonight who should be havin my baby

Bay-beeeeee

Straight up honey really I’m askin. Most of these niggaz think they be mackin, but they be actin. Who they attractin’ with that line, ”What’s your name, what’s your sign”? Soon as he buy that wine I just creep up from behind. And ask what your interests are, ”who you be with”? Things to make you smile, what numbers to dial. You gon’ be here for a while, I’m gon’ go call my crew. You go call your crew. We can rendezvous at the bar around two. Plans to leave, throw the keys to Lil’ Cease. Pull the truck up, front, and roll up the next blunt, so we can steam on the way to the telly go fill my belly. A t-bone steak, cheese eggs and Welch’s grape. Conversate for a few, cause in a few, we gon’ do what we came to do, ain’t that right boo (truuuueee). Forget the telly we just go to the crib and watch a movie in the jacuzzi smoke L’s while you do me

Biggie got confrontational though, and started talking shit about shooting other gangsters, such as... Tupac. The song “Who shot ya” talked about ‘drive-by’s and how Biggie dealt with scuffles, giving others what they deserved - shouting out “as we proceed... to give you what you need”. However, this gangster life would catch up to Biggie for real. A few years after the release of his biggest album “Ready to Die”, Biggie was shot six times in a drive-by, and died... Who shot ya? [10]

Biggie wasn’t the only one considered a gangster’s death a very real possibility, Tupac considered the subject more than once. And not only because he was shot five times in 1994, but the subject had been on his mind since his teen years. This reality came out in his journals and songs. Tupac wrote large amounts of poetry about his mother, his love, his God, and his coming demise. There may have been no way to avoid it the subject of being shot... maybe this was a proper view of reality on the streets. The system seemed up against him, but Tupac didn’t fight against the system. Was his fight against Biggie? or was his fight against himself? In the midst of this nega-
tivity, Tupac was not without hope, as demonstrated in his beautiful poem “The Rose That Grew from Concrete” in which he talks about a rose that persevered against all odds to breathe fresh air [5]. The rose kept its dreams, in spite of the concrete jungle from which it grew. Tupac persevered through many threats, scuffles, and shootings, but all this ended in September of 1996 when he was shot and killed...[13]

_In The Event of My Demise - Tupac Shakur_  
Dedicated to those curious  
In the event of my demise  
when my heart can beat no more  
I hope I die for a principle  
or a belief that I had lived 4  
I will die before my time  
Because I feel the shadow’s depth  
so much I wanted 2 accomplish  
Before I reached my death  
I have come 2 grips with the possibility  
and wiped the last tear from my eyes  
I loved all who were positive  
In the event of my demise [5]

### 3.4 The Spectacle of being Offensive

The decade of the 90’s achieved more than any other, in making the general public’s comfort zone larger than ever.  

The 90s are marked as a decade in which American society would allow free speech and consumer society to support many extreme messages, messages of hate, violence, and just general nastiness. The 80s had pushed the limits public comfort very explicitly. Just watch the many 80s music videos that confront traditional norms concerning religion, sex, race, and gender issues. Videos like Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” or Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s “Relax” are prime examples of this ‘in your face’ challenge to mainstream society. The major difference between 80s extremists and 90s style Hip-Hop spectacle being that most 80s spectacles were pushing upcoming political and social messages, the 90s saw average American teens embracing offensive messages simply because they were offensive. The spectacles of 90s were no longer politically correct, tasteful, or artistic. Mixing races or blurring
gender lines were no long spectacular, so artists reverted to directly joking about racism, sexism, and violence.

The 80s saw many rap groups mobilizing to support the African American community. This movement was doomed to fade, due to the fact that it was tied into a musical style that was rapidly becoming a very valuable commodity. As Hip-Hop was commodified, such messages became tedious to market. Other messages replaced the activism and urban voice carried by the Hip-Hop medium. Obviously, this trend did not effect Hip-Hop alone, as is the nature of the market, it cleaned out such messages from many other styles too. However, the fact that Hip-Hop was gaining a widespread audience should be kept in mind when interpreting some of the groups of the 90s and those that followed. The messages were still extreme, but not necessarily a danger to existing political/economic institutions.

3.4.1 2 Live Crew and Singing Sex

“As Nasty as They Wanna Be” was released in 1989. Many felt that the “Parental Advisory” warning was not strong enough for this album and took the issue to court. In 1990, the album was ruled ‘obscene’ by the court and made illegal to sell. Many retailers were arrested for selling the album and 2 Live Crew was arrested for performing it [6]. In spite, the album sold over 2 million copies. I would consider this the first purely offensive rap album to gain widespread sales. This album is legitimately offensive, very sexist, and completely distasteful. It proved that purely offensive messages are quite marketable, showing that even songs which scream about “bitches and fagots drinking cum” can sell over 2 million copies. Remember though, that while this is incredibly offensive to many, it doesn’t necessarily threaten the economic or political status quo at all, and this reality would be fully exploited by an angsty white boy from Detroit almost 10 years later.

3.4.2 Eminem, Anger, Hate, Sex, Drugs, Life

Eminem came out of the city of Detroit just as it was becoming a legitimate center for developing rap artists. He broke into the national eye in 1999 with the Slim Shady LP. Less than six years later, the Guinness book of World Records lists Eminem as the highest selling rapper of all time (over 70 million albums), outselling Tupac. So what was his highest selling message? A message that behind 9 Grammys, an academy award, and a Golden Globe.
Why has his music gained so much acceptance by the American public and music industry? [8]

First, a little Eminem intro, he does not sing about 'traditional' rap subjects, as joked about in one of his Marshal Mathers LP skits:

[Rick Berman speaking to Eminem]
“You know why Dre’s record was so successful? He’s rappin’ about big-screen tv’s, blunts, 40’s and bitches. You’re rappin’ about homosexuals and Vicadin.
I can’t sell this shit!”

Eminem actually does rap about homosexuals and vicaden, he also dedicated a two song series to killing his ex-wife as well as other songs focused on raping his mother and joking about girls who die from overdosing on mushrooms. So how did he connect with your average high school kid?

I must preface my explanation by saying that I was, in one form or another, one of the “corrupted” masses. In early high school, I listened to his albums day-and-night. This might make my analysis rather subjective, then again, it might make it more representative. Eminem seemed very real, he wasn’t a glamorized gangster, he had problems that weren’t very cool, problems with family, depression, and prescription drug abuse. The seeming honesty concerning ‘real’ problems helped his message seem legitimate. But above all, we listened to him, because he was an extremely witty (and offensive) comedian. Eminem was at his best when making fun of others. And as demonstrated by previous artists’ success, society would buy jokes about hate, drugs, murder, and sex. He confronted problems many suburban white kids related to, as well as ones trashy ghetto kids dealt with. He was writing something for all of us, as stated in “Who Knew” where he starts out by saying “I don’t do black music, I don’t do white music, I make fight music for high school kids.” At first there was opposition in the media, but his witty rhymes rose above all of this opposition. He challenged everybody directly and made us laugh at their resistance to his message. We respected that. He talked about the events we saw around us and gave it a unique spin we could embrace as our own. The lines from his songs both justified and refuted accusations that he was responsible for corrupting our generation.

You want me to fix up lyrics while the President gets his dick sucked? [*ewwww*]
Fuck that, take drugs, rape sluts, Make fun of gay clubs, men who wear make-up
Get aware, wake up, get a sense of humor...
Quit tryin’ to censor music, this is for your kid’s amusement (The kids!)
But don’t blame me when lil’ Eric jumps off of the terrace
You shoulda’ been watchin him - apparently you ain’t parents...

How many retards’ll listen to me?
and run up in the school shootin when they’re pissed at a teacher,
her?, him?, is it you? is it them?
"Wasn’t me, Slim Shady said to do it again!"
Damn! How much damage can you do with a pen?
Man I’m just as fucked up as you woulda been
if you woulda been, in my shoes, who woulda thought
Slim Shady would be somethin that you woulda bought
that woulda made you get a gun and shoot at a cop
I just said it - I ain’t know if you’d do it or not
How the fuck was I supposed to know?

He made fun of our heros, our leaders, our parents, his parents, himself, and us too (the fans). It was the universal nature of it that justified our laughing at offensive subjects. He just wanted to “Cum-on everybody” and he “only cussed to make your mom upset”. He admitted that he “had to cuss to sell records” harkening back to Gang-Starr’s do-what-you-gotta-do mentality.

Did he challenge the status-quo? Not at all. The world realized this soon enough, and adopted him with open arms. And with money and awards on the table, Eminem complied, saying “I am, whatever you say I am” and continued to support the status quo by hating it.

Eminem helped us sleep at night... We didn’t like the system, we hated it, it bothered us, irritated us, repressed us. But, we didn’t want to oppose it directly. I just wanted to go to college, get a job, a girl-friend and hang out with my friends. I wasn’t ready to challenge the system. Eminem was an outlet for our unrest, and he sedated us, until we graduated into the system. And to this day, I still get a strangely warm nostalgic feeling in my heart
when I hear Eminem describe raping his mother and killing his wife. If this is strange, then why where there 10’s of millions of us buying his albums? Maybe we didn’t start chanting ‘dadada’ or put safety pins through our face, instead we sat around singing about rape and murder. Yeah we are crazy... but times are strange.

4 In Conclusion

Hip-Hop developed as a unique style of communication that served an impoverished urban community. It’s message gained widespread audience in the later 80’s, helping to bring national attention to the reality of life in the inner city and rallying the African American community to action. However, this culture and associated art was quickly commodified through a most unusual channel, Gangster Rap. Gangster Rap brought a pacifying message of murder, riches, sex, and drugs to replace the irritant messages of 80s Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop music has been absorbed by popular music genres of the new generation, and is now relatively ubiquitous and politically insignificant.
5 Multimedia Guide

The CD that accompanies this paper includes:

- **#1** Afrika Bambaataa - Renegades of Funk
  Good example of early 80’s Hip-Hop, the type you might have heard spun and mixed by early DJ’s in the Bronx. The song includes break-downs and funky beats.

- **#2** Run-DMC - Peter Piper
  Good example of how mid 80’s rap moved away from sing-song voice and focused on ‘rapping’ witty rhymes. This is also a good example of pure ‘rap’ and the freedom that Hip-Hop artists used to have.

- **#3** A Tribe Called Quest - Skypager
  An example of Hip-Hop taking simple accessories and focusing in on them. This is also an example of serious Hip-Hop artists rapping with joke/parody.

- **#4** Public Enemy - Fight the Power
  Chuck D spews his message against the established forces. Good song to get an idea of how Chuck D went about delivering his message.

- **#5** Gang Starr - Code of the Streets
  A great example of more complex lyrics and interesting beat backup. Great song to compare with modern Hip-Hop styles which lose this artistic approach to lyrics. Also, this song expresses Gang Starr’s ‘matter of fact’ response to the inner-city problems.

- **#6** N.W.A. - Fuck the Police
  The infamous song that made the FBI so happy, shows how early Gangster Rap was developing in the 80s. Also, an example of N.W.A.’s rap style which effected so many of Hip Hop’s trend setters in the early 90s.

- **#7** Dr. Dre - Fuck Wit’ Dre
  A classic G-Funk tune, good example of where Gangster Rap was going in the early 90’s. This is from The Chronic (The landmark Gangster Rap album). Note the direct personal attacks made on other rappers.

- **#8** 2Pac - Hit ’Em Up
  Tupac’s famous song singing about fucking Faith Evans (Biggie’s wife).
• #9 Notorious B.I.G. - Who Shot Ya’
  Biggie Smalls’ song that offended Tupac after being shot. This song talks about ‘drive by’s and such. Note the attitude taken toward the same gangster life that would finally take Biggie and Tupac’s lives.

• #10 Notorious B.I.G. - Big Poppa
  Personally, I feel this is THE classic song about living the bling-bling Gangster life. It doesn’t necessarily talk grillz or rims, but rather focuses on simply chilling and ‘mackin’ chicks, basically just being a pimp. (This song is a much better representation than ‘Big Pimpin’)

• #11 Eminem - Who Knew
  Good example of Eminem threatening others and making fun of everyone. It was songs like this that connected with a lot of us in high school around 1999/2000.

• #12 Lil’ Jon and the Eastside Boyz - What U Gon’ Do?
  Classic example of how simple modern hip-hop, (like Crunk) has become. Compare the lyrics and their delivery to older Hip-Hop like Run-DMC (#2) and Gang Starr (#5)

• #13 Daddy Yankee - Gasolina
  A Reggaeton mega-hit, I feel it was this song that really spread Reggaeton into general public awareness. Chorus translated basically says “do you want/wish for my gasoline” and then the girls respond by screaming “Give me more gasoline!!”. Note the unique ‘Dem Bow’ beat. I would definitely not consider this song the best reggaeton out there, just one of the most famous.

All of these songs are referenced throughout the paper, which is why I included them.

If you would like videos depicting block parties, or videos of break dancers you can email me at aaronbeach@gmail.com
References


[10] Wikipedia. The notorious b.i.g. — wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2006. [Online; accessed 2-June-2006].

