

Prevalence of Rap in Mainstream American Culture

Lucky 7

Matt Magoteaux

Liam Kelley

Jeffrey Kopcak

Claire Large

David Loughry

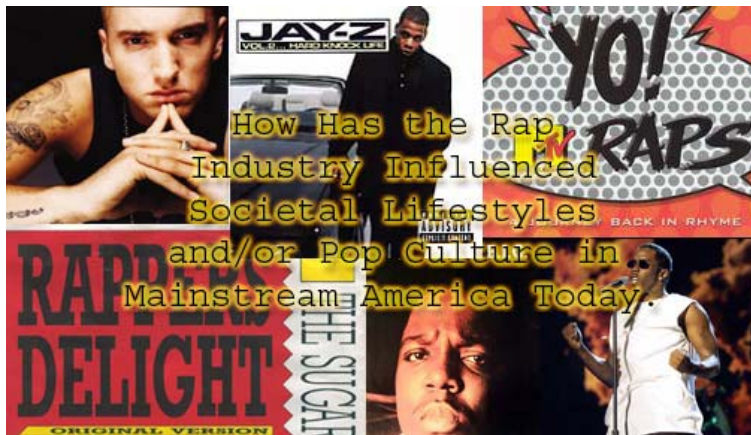
Robert Martin

TCOM 103

Introduction

By Claire Large

The influence and impact of rap can be calculated in record sales, clothing sales and airtime on popular music channels. You can calculate it, or you can simply look around you. Rap music and culture has become a powerful force in popular culture in America in a short time span. “Rapper’s Delight” was released by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979 (Gladney, 1995). This was the first rap record to gain mainstream attention in American culture; it had sold over a million records less than a year later. The Sugar Hill Gang led the way for rap to become an important part of popular music and has extended into and influenced much of popular culture as well. In just over twenty years rap has become a commodity that not only sells music, but also sells an image, and all the products that go with it.



Rap music has origins in soul and funk and grew out of underground improvisation in urban African American areas. The genre as we know it today began to fully develop in the late 1970s. The rap

beats were first used to accompany break dancers, but the early deejays and rappers were unknown (Bitz, 1998). They were local performers, not celebrities, but all of that changed after the breakthrough of the Sugar Hill Gang. From their lead, countless rappers since have worked their way to the top of the radio charts and into American popular culture. For nine years rap existed below the public awareness, but has become one of the most influential genres of music since rock and roll.

Many artists have had a large impact on rap and their importance carries into the culture as a whole. Rappers such as Eminem and 2Pac have pushed boundaries and defined what is acceptable, and sometimes unacceptable in mainstream culture. Rap has changed music through its lyrics. Offensive content has gotten harsh criticism, yet continues to flourish in most mainstream rap artists.

Rap has secured a place in popular culture in part through its constantly increasing television exposure. Channels like BET and MTV spread rap throughout the country and make it accessible to everyone. They have also used television and entrepreneurship to spread the influence of rap culture on popular culture far wider than just in music. It has become a life style, and rappers have branched themselves into many commercial markets. From Sean 'P. Diddy' Combs's Sean Jean clothing line to Bad Boy Records; rap culture has spread into a variety of commodities.

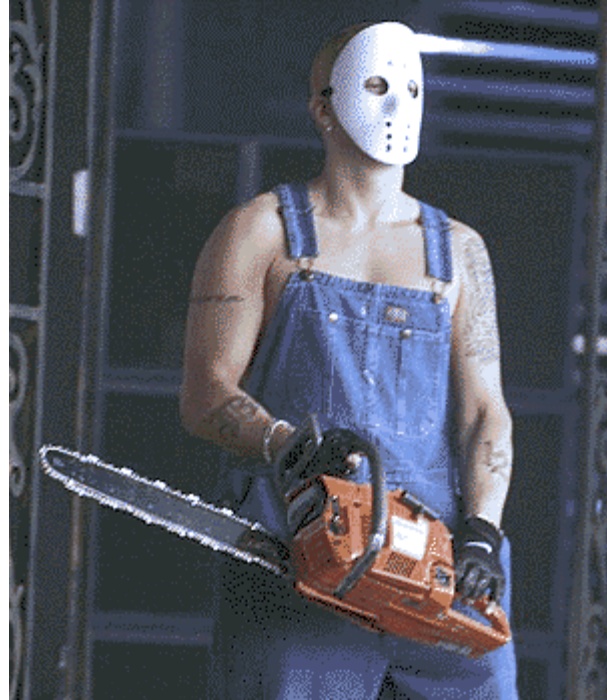
Through all of these avenues rap has started changing popular culture in America. Rap culture is not only in music stores, it's in the mall, in the grocery store and on TV. Rap has not only branched into these markets, it has succeeded spectacularly.

Controversial Artists

By Jeffrey Kopcak

What makes an artist controversial? How do they gain such power and status? Most controversial rap artists usually gain their spot in the mainstream one of two ways. The first way is to promote violence in their music. Most artists will tell you that everyone has more common sense than to follow in their lyrical footsteps and promote violence. However, in an article about Tupac Shakur, it was noted that "unfortunately, the black community itself too often echoes the entertainment industry's efforts to emphasize African-American violence by embracing even the

most brutal criminals in their confrontations with the police” (Medved, 2002). Tupac Shakur, who was tragically killed as a result of gunfire in Las Vegas at the age of 25, “has achieved even greater popularity after his death than he did in his brief, troubled life” (Medved, 2002). Six months later, the Notorious B.I.G. was killed in a drive-by shooting after he left a party in Los Angeles. Also, Jay-Z’s video “99 Problems” portrays urban violence, where in the end he is eventually murdered.



Another controversial artist has made headlines for content in his videos and songs that take stabs at everyone from the media to his mom is Eminem. His song “Kill You” is a song about his troubled life and how much his mom hated him as a kid. One article has the following opening sentence about the latest Eminem controversy: “If it’s time for a new Eminem album, it must be time for another controversy” (Hay, 2002).

This time the controversy is over his new video “Just lose it.” It not only features Eminem dressed up as a Michael Jackson look alike on a bed with kids jumping around, but it also pokes fun at Jackson’s plastic surgery. Jackson has since asked networks to boycott the video, including Black Entertainment Television (BET).

Recently, Sirius Satellite Radio has partnered with Eminem’s Shady Records to bring their subscribers a “hip-hop music and lifestyle channel” to their lineup. Eminem and his

manager will serve as co-executive producers of the Sirius channel. By law the FCC does not have much control over satellite broadcasts.

Rap Song “Lyricizzles”

By Liam Kelley

Rap music is affecting modern American culture through the messages in the actual song lyrics. And certainly evident in today’s world is the fact that rap artists’ lyrics are indeed being heard. This was evident in 2003, when for the first time in the fifty year history of the Billboard Music Charts that the top ten songs were made by African American artists, and nine out of those ten were rap songs (Bialczak, 2003). Rap music is becoming so popular that special rap dictionaries are being made to explain the meanings behind the unique rap language. For instance, according to the *Hip Hoptionary*, by Alonzo Westbrook, the word “marinate” means to put your feet up and relax, even though the word means something totally different to most other people, as a means to make someone’s meat tastier. Another fad that has taken over mainstream



popular culture from the area of rap lyrics is the Snoop Dogg “izzle.” This is a type of bonus prefix to a word made popular by rap artist, Snoop Dogg. Under this new form of language the word “television” would be transformed into “televizzle.”

However, popular as rap song lyrics are now in society there are still people that claim that hip hop lyrics are sending a negative message. Rap artists tell about their own private struggles, while expressing their own anger about situations in their lyrics. The song lyrics are an outlet for the general public to hear the artists own personal story. At times the song lyrics portray an offensive world; however that is the world that most rap artists know. Because of the

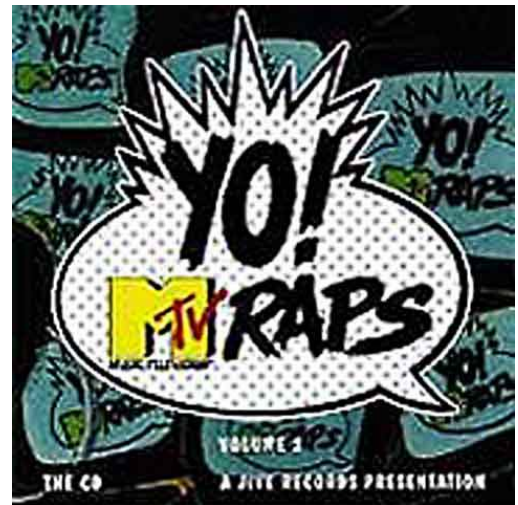
controversial lyrics in rap songs, rappers are scrutinized by the public. However, most of the time the people doing the finger pointing are not from the same walk of life as the actual rap artists and thus are not familiar and cannot relate to the message being portrayed.

YO! Media

By Matt Magoteaux

I think we can say that the change of rap lyrics through the years has been similar to the changes that our culture has witnessed when viewing it thru particular mediums, significantly television. In the past, rap music has always bent the rules and eventually prevailed through time. Today we can see that ‘bending the rules’ does not apply to America like it once did.

Grandmaster Flash, Run-DMC and many other old-school rap artists were well known by there ability to turn a crowd into a frenzy of chants. When a rapper says to sing a line, you better repeat it. And when a rapper tells you to put your hands in the air, you better do it. Today we see this same trend. I have to admit, I know some people who have never been to a rap concert or even seen a rapper in real life, but they sure do know all the dances and movements. Since rap began, television has been the medium to bring it to your living room. In the late 80’s, Music Television began to run a new series called Yo! MTV Raps. At this time, MTV was the pioneer of television, bringing the up and coming rap industry to the eyes of teenagers across America. This show brought rap, which was a new genre on the rise, to the public in an engaging way.



MTV would find its new success to bring about other ideas. Eventually, rap videos were being shown more and more frequently portraying the different life styles that rappers have. It

was not long before you would see kids, specifically teenagers, walking around in their lace less Adidas shoes, backwards hat, baggy pants and shirt. The rap industry had created a new normal for their American culture and that was the norm. When this change in culture began, eyebrows were raising and controversy was starting. Parents became concerned with the new direction of music while their kids were imitating it.

Not only was the image changing, but as mentioned before, the lyrics were as well. Parents became outraged that the use of bad language and sexual references were being available to teenagers at their disposal. This prompted the delayed distribution of some rap albums. Moving forward to the present day it is obvious that we have come a long way; or have we taken a step back? Today, we see and hear things on television that are questionable even to me. Although America is still aware of this, we all seem to turn a blind eye and act as if we are not. America is becoming desensitized by the common occurrence of rap music and culture on television today.

On the other hand, some rap artists have still kept in mind the importance of a meaningful song; Songs dealing with welfare, poverty, abortion, war, death and politics. In current rap news, politics is becoming a main concern as some artists have been taking it into their own hands. Notorious rapper, Sean Combs has taken it upon himself to vote for change. Recently this has been a trend of rappers to gain attention by advertising themselves. We're watching, and they know it.

Entrepreneurship

By Robert Martin

Hip-hop stars in today's era are no longer simply involved in what is known as the "rap game." Today's hip-hop stars indulge themselves in much, much more. A couple of the hip-hop

artists we would like to examine are Sean “P. Diddy” Combs, and Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter.

Besides their names, similarities include companies that pull in multi-million dollars a year in record sales, clothing lines, and even liquors.



P. Diddy, referred to as a “fashion tycoon,” (Padgett, 2004) is one of the biggest hip-hop entrepreneurs of all time. P Diddy originally opened his record label, which is known as Bad Boy Records. From here he continued his company and opened Sean John clothing line. With his celebrity status, his clothing line was sure to be a success. Recently his clothing line “bagged the top fashion award from the Council of Fashion Designers and is one of the top-selling urban clothing lines” (Padgett, 2004). From here P. Diddy refocused his efforts and turned his clothing line in to the “crowning jewel of his company” (Padgett, 2004). However, he did focus on this one branch of his company allowing him to forget the other subsidiaries, which also made up the now colossal company, Bad Boy. Now with the clothing line as the largest segment of his company, he continued his successes with the record label. Bad Boy Records has signed artists Mase, Faith Evans, Black Rob, 8 Ball, MJG and the once known Notorious B.I.G. P. Diddy, being the witty and genius business man he is, knows that his celebrity status turns anything he touches into gold. He continued the rise of his company in the film industry, Bad Boy films, with the show “Making da Band,” airing on MTV. In the Hospitality industry, with the opening of two restaurants called Justin, one residing in Atlanta, and one in New York City, New York. He kept on and continued into the marketing

industry and now holds contracts with Pepsi, Microsoft, and Calvin Klein. All of these branches in different industries make up the company that started out as a record label in a small one bedroom apartment, into Bad Boy, the now \$315 million dollar a year company. This makes Sean “P. Diddy” Combs one of the greatest entrepreneurs of our time and era. He is a smart business man with celebrity status and is not afraid to use it to his advantage knowing that every avenue he decides to go down will prove to be successful.

The second artist that we claim to be a great entrepreneur is Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter. While Jay-Z’s company is not as large and has not gone into as many ventures as P. Diddy’s has he still is an entrepreneur giant. Establishing his name in the hip-hop industry as well as the world, he started the same way that P. Diddy did, as a rap star. He created the company Roc-A-Fella Records. After getting the street credit he needed with his lyrics and beats, Roc-A-Fella records took off. First signing hip-hop stars such as Twista, Free Style, and Kanye West; Roc-A-Fella Records went sky high in record sales and with street credit for signing some of the biggest names in the rap industry. From here Jay-Z did the same thing Diddy did, he used his celebrity status to create an empire. Jay-Z had all he needed to create a winning equation. He continued Roc-A-Fella fashion with Roca Wear, the film industry with Roc-A-Fella films, and just recently into liquor with the creation of Armadale Vodka. This is premium vodka and is only the first of many to come. Jay-Z has been titled “one of the most influential hip-hop entrepreneurs of this era” (Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004).

Conclusion

By David Loughry

In conclusion, hip-hop music and artists have shaped America’s culture in a way that most people probably wouldn’t have thought possible at the time the music was created. What

looked like just a fad has turned into a phenomenon that seems to be gaining more momentum by the second, and the number of devoted fans is constantly growing. Rappers know this and can take advantage of the fact that any product bearing their name or likeness, however unrelated to music it may be, will still be a success because of the massive popularity of their lifestyles. They can also take advantage of the fact that the more controversy they cause, the more attention they will draw to themselves, which will most likely cause more people to buy their products in an effort to rebel against society and the established rules that they are supposed to follow.

Although many rappers today write songs that deal with important issues such as war, racism, and poverty in a serious way, there are still many critics who think that the negative morals portrayed by certain rappers are bad for America's youth, but there's no denying that their influences are permanent and there is no stopping them now. Rap has always been able to change with the times and it will continue to do so, therefore any remaining detractors will have to learn to live with it.

References

- Bialczak, M. (2003, October 27). Hip Hop Effect. *The Post Standard*, 4(1), 11-12. Retrieved November 2, 2004, from <http://www.syracuse.com/news>.
- Bitz, M. (1998). Rap Music and Choral Education. *Teaching Music*. Boston: Zondervan Publishing.
- Chaney, L. (2002) "Sirius, Eminem wrap deal for hip-hop net." *Daily Variety*, 71(3), 23-26. Retrieved October 10, 2004, from Lexis Nexis.
- Gladney, M. (1995). The Black Arts Movement and Hip-Hop. *African American Review*, page 29(2).
- Hay, C. (2003, October 30). Eminem Stirring it Up. *Billboard*, Vol. 116(44), 48. RIGHT Stuff Co. Retrieved October 10, 2004, from Academic Search Premier Database.
- Hendrickson, M., & Blair, F. Rolling Stone; Issue 758, p. 29. Retrieved October 10, 2004, from Academic Search Premier Database.
- Medved, M. USA Today 11/19/2002. Retrieved October 18, 2004, from Academic Search Premier Database.
- Westbrook, A. (2002). *The Hip Hoptionary*. Broadway Books.