

## **Back to the Future: How the History of Jazz Could Be the Future of Rap**

My mother always jokes that I will lose my hearing later in life because I always have my earbuds in, blasting music loudly. That isn't my fault, though- I come from a very musical family even though no one actually pursued a career in music. My earliest memories come from my dad and my grandfather. My dad was a rap-head. Every morning before school, as he would dress and feed me, he would play the latest rap hits from BET. Every afternoon after school, my grandfather would pick me up, and he would only play jazz music in his car. My grandfather was influenced by his parents that grew up during the Jazz Age and enjoyed the music; they played it constantly at home. My father, however, grew up just as hip-hop and rap were evolving and becoming a powerful force in modern society. Even though rap was born in New York and is all about thumping beats and fast rhymes and jazz has origins in New Orleans and depends on brass instruments and soulful vocals, both genres have historical and social parallels. Both cities went through a time of despair when the genres were invented, have roots in West African music, and have caused somewhat of a moral panic to white listeners. We can look at the history of jazz to predict rap's future. Will rap eventually become a mostly white genre and have a white "trailblazer" to lead the way? Will there be a newer form of black music to become more popular than rap? Will rap be finally considered an art form, a genre worthy of winning prestigious awards? Black music in America has traditionally followed the same abysmal cycle of rising to the top of the charts, getting appropriated, and finally realized as a legitimate art form, but becomes replaced by a "cooler" sound, and rap music could possibly follow the same steps. In fact, it is in its final stages. However, we might be able to save rap and hip-hop culture. The

cycle will not stop unless black people go back and reclaim the history of black music and the genres of music that they are mastering.

### **African Roots**

Jazz and hip-hop/rap, as well as other African-American music genres such as ragtime, blues, rock and roll, and R&B, are all musical derivatives of West African music, and by extension, the culture (Banfield 28,30). Music was integral to African social life and helped people connect with each other, so it's no shock that slaves brought the same importance of music with them to America (Banfield 29). There are many stylistic similarities, like the importance of chanting and spoken word in African society (Banfield 28), and the kora, a stringed instrument used in African griot music, and its likeness to a guitar that is used in blues music (Gioia 15). African music also has these common elements: it's communal (everyone and anyone can participate), rhythmically dynamic (large emphasis on drums/beat of a song), uses guttural expressions (grunts and groans), listener participation (call and response), and physical movement (popular dance) is tied into it (Banfield 31). Many songs of both genres want listeners to respond with a chant or sing/rap along with the artist. The beats that both jazz and rap have constantly switch tempo, and you might even have two different beats happening at once. You can compare this to European styles, where the songs were melodically complex but had a simple beat. Jazz used typical grunts and groans, but in rap you are more likely to hear this through ad-libs that rappers do behind the main track. Today's hip-hop dances include the Milly Rock and Hit Dem Folks as the most popular, while back in the 20's, the Charleston was the

popular jazz dance at the time. These stylistic origins survived the slave trade and gained a footing in African American music.

### **New Orleans and New York: A Wasteland**

These roots of the two genres don't just come from Africa, they also come from cities going through a time of anguish. New Orleans had a hopeful future in the early 1800's, as they went through a time of unforeseen financial growth, but that hope quickly weakened as health and sanitation started to grow along with the population. Trade restrictions were lifted from the Mississippi River in 1803, allowing for boats to transport goods such as cotton, grain, sugar, and molasses to the rest of the country (Gioia 27). The population was also booming; its size doubled in 50 years (Gioia 27). However, after railroads became a more popular and preferred method of transporting goods, the city started to quickly deteriorate because they lost a good source of income from trade, as other cities were being set up as important trading posts (Gioia 27). The population of New Orleans kept increasing even though roughly 2% of the population died due to yellow fever, there was a lack of a sewage system- the city finally got one in 1892, which is way behind other major American cities- and became real estate to vermin such as roaches and mosquitoes (Gioia 28). These hardships eventually impacted how long people lived. The native black life expectancy on average was 36 years old, while the white life expectancy was about 46 years (Gioia 28). Those death rates were 56% higher than any major American city at the time, and furthermore, black infant mortality rates were up 46%. The combination of these unfathomable rates of death and living conditions for people and racial strife helped contribute to the start of jazz.

In New Orleans, jazz got its real start through ethnic integration. If the Black Creole population and Black population didn't mix, jazz might've not developed as a genre. Creoles are people of French or Spanish descent, and Black Creoles are black people who are mixed with the white people of French or Spanish descent, usually due to slave masters raping their female slaves (Gioia 32). After slavery was abolished, the Black Creoles never fully integrated into Black society- they had their own culture and were more inspired by European culture (Gioia 32). Because of this, Creoles were also more classically trained in music, a contrast to the unrefined nature of Black musicians, who probably learned from other black people and not aristocrats (Gioia 32). This all came to a head in 1890 with the Louisiana Legislative Code No. 111, which rendered anyone of African descent a "negro" (Gioia 32). These Creoles now had to compete with the Black artists who had a "hotter" sound (Gioia 32). They were all pushed to Storyville, a red-light district in New Orleans, where jazz is believed to be born (Gioia 29).

New Orleans is known for its strong culture of celebration, such as Mardi Gras, which was born out of peril. Even in the 1800's, this society of parades and festivals was strong (Gioia 28). The residents of New Orleans needed something to be happy about and to look forward to. This music was born because people needed a way to express themselves when they and their loved ones were dying at rates way higher than the national average at the time. One artist, dubbed the father of jazz, Buddy Bolden, became popular among black youth because, in the lyrics of his songs, he called out local legislature as well as other figures (Gioia 34). Music allowed for youth to be outspoken and criticize their society.

Hip-hop and rap music also allowed for this candid nature, as the South Bronx in the 1970's turned into a war zone. In the late 40's, the Cross Bronx Expressway was in the making,

and the project was spearheaded by Robert Moses (Chang 11). He envisioned a city where Manhattan was the mitochondria and every borough had to be connected to it. In order to achieve this, Moses bulldozed through neighborhoods in other boroughs, displacing poorer Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Jews. These people then relocated to areas such as East New York, or East Brooklyn, and South Bronx (Chang 11). In these areas, the remaining white population was mad that other populations were moving in and attacked them and in response, some of the first gangs were made for safety purposes (Chang 12). These gangs also flourished because of the lack of job opportunity. Youth unemployment rates were between 60%-80% (Chang 13). The housing was also in a horrible state. Slumlords made money by not providing adequate heat and water to tenants, withholding property taxes, and paying third-parties to commit arson so that they could collect the insurance money (Chang 13). However, no city or state officials were taking any action to help them.

Bill Moyers, a reporter for CBS said: “Somehow our failures at home paralyze our will and we don’t approach a disaster like the death of the Bronx with the same urgency and commitment we carry to problems abroad” (qtd in Chang 16). He was right, as New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said that “the issue of race could benefit from a period of ‘benign’ neglect” (qtd in Chang 14). The housing commissioner, Roger Starr, introduced a ‘planned shrinkage’ of the Bronx, in which the city would slowly remove services such as transportation, police, sanitation, fire, and health in hopes that the residents would get frustrated and leave (Chang 18). All of this led to a prominence in gangs starting in the late 1960’s and early-mid 70’s, whose members were among some of the first rap artists.

All of the competition between the gangs led to an all-out gang war that happened in the mid 70's, which was a catalyst for rap to start developing as a genre of music. The Black Spades, Savage Nomads, the Brothers and Sisters, and the Ghetto Brothers were few of the more well known and popular gangs in the Bronx (Chang 50). A member of the Ghetto Brothers, Cornell Benjamin aka "Black Benjie", was trying to make peace between all of the gangs. He eventually died after getting beaten to death by rival gang members (Chang 56). This inspired the leaders of the Ghetto Brothers, Carlos Suarez, and Benjy Melendez, to hold a peace summit in December 1977, in which they tried to reach a peace treaty (Chang 60). They did reach a treaty, however, right after the meeting, the fighting resumed, and led many gang members to believe that this was just a facade to show the press so that the police would get off of their backs (Chang 61). The police did take note, and just days after the meeting the NYPD's Bronx Youth Gang Task Force was started (Chang 62). The unit ended up arresting many leaders such as the Savage Nomads leader Ben Buxton. The meeting did have a positive effect, as a young Afrika Bambaataa and other Black Spades started doing community service projects (Chang 63), and eventually became one of the driving forces in early rap, along with the Ghetto Brothers.

People in the South Bronx acted like their fellow New Orleanians and went to the streets to have fun during block parties in order to take their mind off of the gang war and mass arrests that had just happened. The Ghetto Brothers Band (now technically an offshoot of the Ghetto Brothers gang) started to host weekly block parties where people could go have fun and unwind (Chang 65). Going through having police ravishing a neighborhood and state officials neglecting that same neighborhood takes a toll on the communities there. The Ghetto Brothers were also known for being outspoken, like criticizing the lack of employment and activities,

insufficient health care, and police brutality, as well as advocating for Black and Puerto Rican solidarity and advancement (Chang 52). These messages were put onto an album Ghetto Brothers Power Fuerza in the name of the “little people” of the world gaining power. That hope for equality as well as the blues/jazz and the Latin-inspired album was considered the first album to have rap in it (Chang 64).

The horrible conditions that people lived in led to not only the creation of the genres but fostered the outspoken nature of both Black people and artists in said genres. As mentioned, Buddy Bolden criticized leaders of his community (Gioia 34) and the Ghetto Brothers were advocating for minorities to have a place in society (Chang 64). Not only that, the genres were also born out of celebrations: parades for New Orleans, block parties for New York. Each decade/generation has their own struggles, as Malcolm X said: “Racism is like a Cadillac- there’s a new version every year”. Because of this, each generation has their own unique response, such as creating complex melodic and rhythmic structures with their music, or extremely complicated rap with wordplay. Even though the genres and times have changed, and black music evolves, the criticism that outsiders have said has not.

### **Ruining America’s Youth**

At the height of their popularity, rap and jazz have been blamed for corrupting America’s youth and ruining the morals of America. Even though the language has changed slightly, the message has stayed the same: black music is causing our kids and society to be immoral. In the intro to *Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation*, Anne Shaw Faulkner writes: “Welfare workers tell us that never in the history of our land have there been such immoral

conditions among our young people, and in the surveys made by many organizations regarding these conditions, the blame is laid on jazz music and its evil influence on the young people of to-day". She then goes on to describe the dances as "outrageous" and saying that because jazz doesn't follow a strict rhythm, it is inspiring people to be provocative, and waking a dark part of kids. Likewise, a video of a white woman reciting the lyrics of Vince Staples' song Norf Norf while crying, saying: "why is this [song] on here [the radio]... I can't believe this song is on the radio... this is what our youth is being subjected to". When she uses the word "subjected", she's implying that rap music is being forced upon her child, which is not the case. Her daughter decided to turn on the radio station and listen to the song. This gives a fascinating insight into the minds of people who agree with her: does the prominence of rap and hip-hop culture feel forced? It's rare to hear someone use this type of language with white artists. By the end of that quote, the woman bursts into tears and can barely keep her composure. She is so upset that her eleven-year-old daughter heard the song on the radio, even though the cuss words were censored, thus deeming it ok to be broadcasted. She's obviously very unknowledgeable about inner-city life. Both rap and jazz give some insight into the lives of the people that play/perform it. These songs arose from the horrible conditions that black people were living in, and it's a little disheartening that many non-black listeners are scared of this and shut it out completely, instead of actually looking into the content and realizing that many black people also live this way and that there needs to be a change.

Another iconic pop culture moment in the criticism of rap happened in 2003 when producer Dame Dash and rapper Cam'ron appeared on the Bill O'Reilly show for an interview with him and a school administrator. This sets itself apart from the other pieces of criticism



though, because two people involved in hip-hop were there to defend the culture. The principal of a school, Salome Thomas-El, said that “when you [Cam’ron] rap, you rap about what these children relate to because it’s in their environment” and goes on to say that it’s encouraging them to be violent. Bill O’Reilly then asks Cam’ron if he cares if the kids are being adversely affected by his songs, to which he says “Yes. But you gotta talk to they parents... you need to have parent-teacher conferences with your students... I can’t go home and talk to them for you”. He raises an important point; parents need to monitor their children, and if they don’t want them to listen or watch something, they need to eliminate it from their kids’ lives. This is a piece of advice that the mother who ranted about the song Norf Norf is taking. She stated that her daughter is not allowed to listen to that radio station at all. However, it is a disservice to kids to not be involved with rap at all because they aren’t exposed to other points of views, or even role models such as Jay-Z, someone who became an entrepreneur and gives back to his community.

However, Cam’ron’s music talks about his struggles as a black boy in Harlem, which doesn’t fit in with O’Reilly’s assertion that his music was all about drugs and money. In his song Welcome to New York City, he raps “Yo, there's a war goin' on outside no man is safe from (word?)/ It don't matter if you three feet or eight-one/You'll get eight from the nine and straight blow”. Gang violence was prevalent and he’s expressing how bad it was in the streets, where anyone could get shot, no matter how big or intimidating they were. He mentions his love for his city, saying “the home of 9/11, the place of the lost Towers/ We still banging, we never lost power, tell 'em (Welcome to New York City, welcome to New York City!)”. Even though a tragedy happened, and the hardships of living there, New York City is still influential, still hot, and they are proud to be from the city.

Other songs that have taken on different meanings originally were about actual issues the black community faced. Take Chamillionaire's *Ridin'* for example. He raps: "They see me rollin,/ They hatin'/ Patrollin' they tryna catch me ridin' dirty". Many commercials and internet memes took it as literal haters- people who are jealous of Chamillionaire- hating on him for his new ride, and that is reflected in the jokes that people made. But, he is actually making a case against the strict policing of black people. "They" is the police, and "ridin' dirty" refers to drugs. Many innocent black people do get framed for having drugs such as weed or cocaine on them, and he's scared that they are going to catch them. But, people misinterpreted these lyrics and made it into a "silly" song. But, we are starting to see a shift from this. As rap becomes a bit more white, the criticisms of it being all about drugs, money, and unimportant topics starts to wane. However, it could be detrimental to the genre.

### **Becoming White, Legitimized, and Replaced**

This year, Kendrick Lamar won a Pulitzer Prize for music with his album, *Damn*. Usually, this award goes to other genres of music. But Joe Coscarelli said that the vote for Lamar was basically unanimous (qtd in Félix). This shows that rap is beginning to be considered a respected and legitimate art form. But does this signal its decline as a popular genre of music? In 1997, Wynton Marsalis won the first Pulitzer for Jazz, years after its height and domination of the charts (Félix). Even though rap isn't at that stage yet, it can be going there soon.

J. Cole has said that in "20 to 30 years from now, I can see rap being completely white" (qtd in Barnes). He is right; with Eminems and G- Eazys entering the genre, rap can become more like jazz and see less black people in the genre. If white people want to enter black

music, they must respect the people who created it. However, this is not always the case, and they can end up infiltrating black genres of music. Look at Paul Whiteman and Iggy Azalea. In *Blues People* by Amiri Baraka (at the time of the publication he was known as Leroi Jones) it says that 1924, Paul Whiteman and another all-white jazz band, the Mound City Blue Blowers, were the biggest names in jazz (144). This is a complete shift from a genre that was predominantly black and was berated by white people. Even Whiteman himself saw his jazz as superior to jazz made by blacks, saying that it's not "the crude jazz of the past" (qtd in Baraka 100). He doesn't see black jazz musicians as equals because they made the "hot" sound of jazz- which was less rigid and structural. It makes one wonder: if he didn't like the older jazz styles, how did he possibly pursue a career in the genre? He actually made jazz a bit more European by having a "European Style" orchestra to accompany him (Baraka 100). Now, there's nothing wrong with adding one's own influences to a different genre of music; in fact, that's what helps an art form grow. However, knowing that he considered the old jazz that was pioneered by Blacks to be primitive, makes his adding of a European orchestra like a blow to the knee. He is even mirroring the language of Anne Shaw Faulkner by calling it "crude". Iggy Azalea hasn't called rap "crude", yet the caricature she portrays is. Azalea grew up in Australia and has a clear Australian accent when she speaks, but when she raps, her voice suddenly loses the accent. She puts on a "blaccent"- or a black accent- in order to sound like she fits in. Eminem and other white rappers don't try to "sound black" and have achieved great success and popularity. Macklemore even won a Grammy in 2013 for his album *The Heist* (Barnes). Azalea's over-use of African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, for someone who didn't grow up around black people, is troubling, and it shows her clear disregard for actually learning the history of rap

and black culture in general. Many black people get berated for speaking their natural dialects, but when she does it she is said to be “running” the rap game (Barnes). She can sell “ghetto” a whole lot easier because she didn’t grow up in one, thus she can’t rap actual details about it. She is a softer version of southern or Atlanta rap.

Hope is not all lost, though. One can find white artists that do respect black people and their craft or are at least on their way to being a better ally. Benny Goodman and Macklemore are opposites to Paul Whiteman and Iggy Azalea. In 1936, Benny Goodman hired Teddy Wilson to play the piano with his band. This is widely considered to be the first time a Black artist played with a White band (Vitale). Later that year, he added electric vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, and three years later he added electric guitarist Charlie Christian (Vitale). He had high regard for these black artists whose culture created the genre and invited them to be a part of his band. He represents what music should and could be about: different people of different backgrounds coming together to make something beautiful, but not stripping the culture from the creators. Macklemore is like Goodman, but instead, he has taken more of an allied approach and makes music that actually calls out himself. In his song White Privilege II, Macklemore takes on three different perspectives: himself, the media, and his fans. But, the most interesting lenses are the media and the fans. He says to himself “You’re Miley [Cyrus], You’re Elvis, You’re Iggy Azalea/So fake and plastic/You’ve heisted the magic”. He is mindful of what the media says and takes it to heart. He is recognizing his place and is inadvertently asking Iggy and Miley to do the same. He later raps about from an “old mom” point of view, rapping: “You’re the only hip-hop that I let my kids listen to/ Cause you get it, all that negative stuff it isn’t cool/ Yeah?/ Yeah, like, all the guns and the drugs”. This is a little dig at parents like the Norf Norf rant mom. His rap is

more “positive” because he didn’t grow up in an adverse environment, and isn’t faking a “ghetto” or “hood” persona, in an effort to relate to his peers. These two show how white people can enter black music, not infiltrate it.

### **What’s the New Moves?**

With rap having more white artists it’s becoming more commercialized, which can lead to a newer form of black music becoming the main way we express ourselves. In order to make sure rap doesn’t get replaced by a different genre like Jazz was with rock and roll and R&B (Banfield, 60), black people need to learn their music history. Essays like this need to be public so that we can take from it and see the cycle repeats itself. We need to take ownership and make sure that our culture is spread responsibly. This is not to say that white people and other races cannot take part in rap, but we need to make sure that they know this history so that they cannot take ownership of something that is not theirs. But people of other races need to be open to learning the history and engaging with the community. This is easier said than done and will not miraculously change overnight. It isn’t until then that this cycle of black music being born from a struggle, facing intense scrutiny, and becoming appropriated will ever be stopped.

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