

## **Resistance through music: healing and unity**

Written by Katharine Chi

Music is part of life; it can unite people, heal those who are struggling, enhance life experiences and help us understand who we are. Music is a broad genre of art, but it is a pivotal part of any culture. In America, music has grown from a foundation built by Black artists.

The [Harlem Renaissance](#) was a revolutionary era that influenced every aspect of American culture. The 1910s through the mid-1930s represented an explosion of African American culture, which began in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, and has revolutionized today's literature, music and art.

American pop culture is based on African American artists, and one of the greatest genres that have emerged are rap and hip-hop. A major issue that came with the genre was [negative associations](#) with drugs, misogyny and violence that are still perceived the same way [today](#). A [study](#) carried out by David Jernigan, executive director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University, goes to show that these associations do exist.

This perception was produced as a consequence of how major record labels marketed the music genre. Travis Dixon, a communication professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said the stigma around rap is not an accurate representation of the whole genre.

Dixon said, "When people think about hip-hop or think about music, they tend to think of the main industry troupes when it comes to the music, and it's easy to fall into that; a lot of scholars fall into that. Scholars have spent a lot of time writing about how hip-hop is full of stereotypes and misogyny and all of that."

According to Dixon, while there are songs that glorify illegal and may promote illegal behavior, in some cases, rappers produce these songs because these topics have higher [profitability](#). However, there do exist many songs that discourage violence and substance abuse. Many popular rap songs such as "Keep Ya Head Up" by Tupac Shakur and "Polo & Shell Tops" by Meek Mill discuss social issues in the Black community, and that goes to show that these important messages are being heard and even recognized. Some fear this genre of music will taint their children and encourage aggression, while others see it as a means of healing and recognizing ongoing issues.

Fourth-year chemistry and Black studies double major Ethan "E.J." George is the president of the UCSB Black Student Union and one of the founders of the UCSB Culture club — "A Black-led movement to build community through the appreciation of Black art, culture and

excellence,” according to the organization’s [Instagram bio](#). George said that from a young age, he was exposed to music through his church choir and his family.

“Music can be what anybody wants it to be. I think, in general, our mainstream idea of music comes from just cultural representations of our experiences,” George said. “It’s a multitude of different sounds and the history that all of that encompasses. That’s really music to me — things that make me feel some type of way ... sounds that evoke a certain energy that can pull people together [and] can break people apart.”

George said he sees music as a powerful entity that can divide people, but it can also unite those with similar experiences and shared identities.

George grew up in Stockton, California, a city where he said hip-hop culture was prevalent and served as a reflection of what the people in his community enjoyed and experienced

“Hip-hop is ... a product of where they’re from and the socio-political situation that they grew up in. So, I listen to that proudly just because it keeps me grounded in where I came from and the type of people that I want to be able to advocate for and represent and not necessarily defend any negativity or violence, but be able to provide context to those that don’t understand.”

George said that since coming to UCSB, he aspired to find his own identity and space where he can freely express himself without conforming to another culture. From working as a DJ and producing music to leading the UCSB Black Student Union, George said, “I strive to create that space for people that come from places where I come from too, [so that they can] be comfortable and celebrate Black culture with other Black students.”

Music is an important part of George’s life, and he said it has helped him express his authentic self and unite a community of others who share a culture of great history and knowledge.

Along with its ability to unite, [music has been able to lift the stigma](#) around mental illness and encourage those struggling with their mental health to seek help. Hip-hop and rap songs are beginning to address mental health topics, while also sharing their life living in low-income communities. Many rap artists like Kendrick Lamar, The Notorious B.I.G. and Lil Wayne discuss their personal history with depression, anxiety and addiction through their lyrics. Rap and hip-hop art has progressed from having to destigmatize the genre itself to the genre now being able to destigmatize other controversial areas of society. By bringing mental health issues to light, the artists are encouraging their audience to seek help and to not be afraid.

In general, music is a healing tool. According to the [National Library of Medicine](#), studies on patients with diagnosed mental disorders displayed visible improvement in their mental health

after using music therapy. Music is part of the Creative Art Therapies, where art is carried out in a therapeutic setting, and is especially effective for those who struggle with communication. Creative art therapies provide a safe and supporting environment, encouraging people to express themselves in any way possible.

Black artists have used art to express their experiences and emotions in a [safe and creative manner](#). A lot of today's culture is credited to Black artists, and their work continues to heal and unite listeners. Music is a powerful entity that defines cultures and communities and identities.