Introduction to Hip Hop Culture

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*Rap and Hip Hop Culture*
Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois, eds.  
*The Anthology of Rap*
Ed Piskor

*Hip Hop Family Tree, Vol. 1-4*
Origins of Hip Hop

Hip hop is generally said to have originated in the South Bronx, New York City in the late 1970s.

There are “4 elements” to hip hop culture:
1. Rapping or MCing (Language)
2. DJing (Music)
3. Breaking or Breakdancing (Dance)
4. Graffiti (Visual Art)

Others?

Etymology of Hip Hop
What is Rapping?  
A Definition

• Rhythmic speech, usually in rhyme
• Heightened speech, more than talking
• Metaphor and other poetic techniques
• Storytelling
Some Historical Origins of Rapping

- Verbal Art Traditions
  - Toasting, the Dozens, Signifying
- Talking Blues
- Jazz
- Singing Preachers
- Comedians
- R&B and Soul
- Radio DJs
- Jamaican Music
- Black Nationalist poets
Toasting

• African American verbal art tradition
• Story told in rhyme or prose
• Celebrates an anti-hero or outlaw
• Toasting includes:
  – The Dozens
  – Signifying
  – Boasting

  – Interrelation of these traditions
The Dozens

- The Dozens: African American game of insults
- “Ya Mama” jokes
- Cipher (circle)
- Battle Rap connection

Ex: KRS One on The Dozens
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9hyoNGtkPE

Ex: In Living Color – “Wheel of Dozens”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dc4zcFnMIgos (start at 1:00)
Signifying (Signifyin’)

- Encoded messages
- Can take away uneven power dynamic

Ex: “The Signifyin’ Monkey”
   - field recording by Alan Lomax
- African American folk character: trickster figure
- This is also a toast
Boasting: Bo Diddley

- Self-mythologizing
- **Hyper-masculinity**
- Self-adulation

- Art of the boast

Ex: Bo Diddley – “I’m Bad” (1956)
Talking Blues

- Half spoken, half sung
- Emphasis on rhythm over melody

Ex: Frankie “Half-Pint” Jaxon
  – “Jive Man Blues” (c. 1926-29)
Cab Calloway

- American Jazz singer, bandleader
- “The grandfather of rap music” – Afrika Bambaataa
- *The New Cab Calloway’s Hepster’s Dictionary* (1938)
- **Jive Talk, Ebonics**

Ex: Cab Calloway – “The Jungle King” (1947)
Singing Preachers

• Half spoken, half sung
• Call and response

Ex: Rev. CL Franklin

– “Two Fish and Five Loaves of Bread” (1961)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLdrFtxKq5s
Comedy: Pigmeat Markham

• Comedian

• Singer, dancer, actor

Ex: Pigmeat Markham –

“Here Comes The Judge” (1968)

• Comedy records
Radio DJs

- “Personality DJs”
- Slang, jive talk, rhymes
- Influence

Ex: Frankie “Hollywood” Crocker, intro (1967)

– 1960s/1970s NYC

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYHXYsqZqtc
(start at 1:27)
Jamaican music

- Dancehall culture
  - Toasting: Jamaican meaning
  - different from US toasting
- Instrumental “versions”
- Live: sing-talking
- Becomes a lucrative recorded music, 1969-70

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMFbPbvKf8w

Ex: U-Roy – “Stick Together” (1972)
Rob Kenner, hip hop writer:

“...many of the breakthroughs usually attributed to hip hop were first achieved by Jamaican mobile discotheques. [...] there's no denying that the basic concept of deconstructing a familiar track, and then chatting over this remixed version to make something new – rap music by any other name – started in Jamaica”

(from The Vibe History of Hip Hop, 352).
1970s Political Poets

• New York Jazz Poetry (“Jazzoetry”)
• Direct influence on hip hop
  – Especially socially conscious hip hop

Ex: The Last Poets – “E Pluribus Unum” (1973)

• Black Consciousness
• Black Nationalism
• Afrocentricism
1970s Political Poets

- Gil Scott-Heron

  Ex: Gil Scott-Heron

    – “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (1971)

- Socially conscious satire