Hip Hop in Music and Culture

Week 5:
Message Rap and Gangsta Rap
Message Rap
• Also Conscious Rap (as in Socially Conscious)
• Problems faced by black communities
• Possible solutions
• Positive black identity
• Unity

Gangsta Rap
• “Reality Rap”
• Street tales of criminality
Context: NYC in the 1970s and 1980s

- Bankruptcy in 1970s
- Unemployment, poverty, crime
- drugs (esp. crack cocaine)
Burned out building, Bronx, c.1970s
“The Message”

- 1st major conscious rap
- Duke Bootee
- Melle Mel

“dystopian series of urban vignettes”

- Synthesizer, no house band
- Single of the year

Ex: Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five


- Lyrics
Public Enemy

- Politics, activism
- Black Panthers of Rap
- Militancy
- Chuck D
- Flavor Flav
- Terminator X
Chuck D’s Style

- Rhythmic approach and flow
- Hard to predict the next accent, often on offbeat, continues to next phrase
- Rhythmically similar to jazz
- Nation of Islam (Black Panther outgrowth)
- Punk politics, rebellion

Ex: Public Enemy

- “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos (1988)
Boogie Down Productions

• KRS-One
• DJ Scott La Rock
• New styles

Ex: Boogie Down Productions
Ice-T

- Iceberg Slim
- G-Style

- West coast gangsta persona

Ex: Ice-T – “6 ‘N the Mornin’” (1986)

- Outlaw folk hero
- Rejects status symbols
N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude)

- Formed in 1986, Compton, California
- Eazy-E, MC Ren, Ice Cube, DJ Yella, Dr. Dre
- Influence

- Big breakthrough: *Straight Outta Compton* (1988)

• FBI warning letter

• What issues does NWA bring up?

• How does gangsta rap resemble earlier social-commentary rap

• And how does it differ?
Parent’s Music Resource Centre (PMRC)

• Founded 1985
• Goal of denouncing obscenities and violence in rock music
• They claimed these kinds of lyrics were at least partly responsible for many societal problems, like rape, teen suicide and teen pregnancies
• Censorship?
• Congressional hearings
• Result
“Responsibility of artists”

• When people suggest that gangsta rap is somehow irresponsible, what do they mean?

• On the other hand, when people say that this music is more responsible than most others, why would they say that?
Black Nationalism in Rap Music

• Political, cultural or economic elements in music

• Errol Henderson writes about three ways that black nationalism is present in rap:

1. A Common Agenda
   • i.e. to make African Americans self-sufficient; to learn about Black history, and to acknowledge the past

2. A Common Sense of Oppression

3. A Common Cultural Perspective
Afrocentric Rap

• Native Tongues and others
Native Tongues

• NYC-based rap collective
• Jungle Brothers
• Afrika Bambaataa
• Positive Afrocentric messages and samples
• Discuss difficult social issues
• Response to Gangsta rap
Jungle Brothers

- Native Tongues
- Jazz, James Brown, Soul

Ex: Jungle Brothers

- “Acknowledge Your Own History” (1989)
De La Soul

- Eclectic sounds, samples and lyrical content
- Class consciousness

Video Ex: De La Soul – “Me, Myself and I” (1989)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJEzEDMqXQQ