THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF HIP HOP CULTURE IN CORPORATE AND MAINSTREAM AMERICA, 1995-1998

by

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ABSTRACT

From 1995-1998 hip hop music and culture rose from the periphery of society to mainstream and worldwide commercialization as it rode the wave of increasing globalization, incredible American economic growth, and the explosion of internet and computer technologies, to national and international prominence in mainstream society. During this time, hip hop also developed distinctive regional sounds, styles, and identities, namely in the West Coast and the South, which challenged New York’s hegemony, trend setting, and dominance over the culture and its music. Furthermore, hip hop experienced rampant mainstream commoditization, and widespread cooptation by corporate interests.

Thus, during 1995-1998, because of the crystallization of hip hop culture in corporate and mainstream American society, the hip hop nation struggled to maintain its realness and trueness to its traditional identities and foundational values in the face of cooptation and assimilation from mainstream and corporate America. By the end of the decade, hip hop manifested itself as both a multibillion dollar industry, and as the nation’s number one selling musical genre, highlighting an important shift toward a new era in hip hop’s ongoing development.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Professor Christopher Agee
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my father and mother, Robert MacDonald Acker and Patricia Thacker Lynn. It is also dedicated to all my family members, friends, supporters, teachers, fellow musicians and hip hop heads, and to my greatest mentor Dr. Daisaku Ikeda.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give thanks to all my professors in the Department of History at Western State University of Colorado, as well as at the University of Colorado at Denver, to whom I am deeply indebted. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to these professors as they have exerted an undeniable influence on my development as both a disciple of history and as a human being. I would especially like to extend my thanks to the members of my thesis committee who helped to oversee this project, including Professors Christopher Agee, Alison Shah, and Pamela Laird. Likewise, I owe as much gratitude to hip hop music and culture, as well as the numerous artists, who influenced me to not only write this work, but also participate in the continuing creation of this art and its aesthetic lifestyle. My appreciation and warmest regards are also extended to all my colleagues, peers, and fellow students who I’ve had the distinct pleasure of sharing my time and experiences with at these institutions of higher learning.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“The backward-cap-wearing B-boys and B-girls, however subconsciously, changed radio, music, and, many would argue, American culture.” – *VIBE*, 1996¹

![Figure 1: Tupac Shakur in 1994.](image)

At the university hospital in Las Vegas, on Friday the thirteenth of September 1996,

Tupac Shakur succumbed to his gunshot wounds. Six months later, after a party co-sponsored by *VIBE* magazine in Los Angeles, Christopher Wallace (AKA the Notorious B.I.G. and Biggie

Smalls) died in a flurry of gun shots. Their deaths brought to an end the bi-coastal “rap war” between New York’s Bad Boy and Los Angeles’s Death Row Records. *VIBE* magazine wrote: “In just a few short months, two extraordinarily talented young men who were at the center of the stupid and overhyped rivalry between Death Row and Bad Boy, played out so extensively in our pages over the past year, were dead.”³ Shakur and Wallace personified their respective Coasts (East and West), and both were regarded as the most talented and greatest rap stars of their time, perhaps ever. Both men had yet to reach the age of 26. Both deaths sparked national commentary and debate from all over America, over the meaning of their lives and deaths for not only hip hop, but also for American society. After 2pac’s death, *The Source* wrote, “Effects of his death crossed racial and economic lines, with confused white parents in suburbia reporting sobbing teenagers, and even single mothers in the ‘hood recounting how they were inspired by his heartfelt lyrics.”⁴ Their deaths cemented hip hop culture into the national consciousness of America. Hip hop moved beyond humble origins as merely a niche or subculture, which rose from the South Bronx in New York City, into the forefront of the mainstream.⁵

The period of 1995-1998 stands as the most pivotal and critical time in hip hop’s ongoing development.⁶ While Tupac and Biggie’s deaths sparked national attention and debate, they proved only one crucial aspect of how rap music propelled itself to the forefront of mainstream society during 1995-1998. This period not only set the groundwork for its future development and dominance in American culture, but also foreshadowed many of the problems and paradoxes rap music and hip hop culture’s adherents struggled against both then and now.

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⁶ Ibid., 325, 332.
CHAPTER II

THE RISE OF HIP HOP AND ITS GROWING INTERNATIONAL PRESENCE

By the beginning of the 2000s, hip hop appeared deeply rooted or connected on virtually every level of American society, including education, popular culture, politics, music, art, fashion, technology, economics, media, and even ideologies. To understand this development and the focus on 1995-98, one must first appreciate the historical context, foundation, and development of hip hop through the mid-'90s.

The 1990s was a period of American affluence and global cultural influence. Many developments for the time pointed to the global prowess and influence of the United States, such as the “end” of the Cold War and the acceleration of ‘globalization.’ Globalization found the widespread conflation and dissemination of computers, telecommunications, the internet, entertainment, global trade and finance, international markets and commerce, industries, technologies, and cultures increasingly apparent and prominent throughout both America and the world. As a result the 1990s-2000s periods are often referred to as the Information Age or the Digital Revolution, recognizing the major roles played by computers, telecommunications, and other digital technologies to the process of globalization. For America, this Digital Revolution meant an upsurge in economic growth and stability. This upsurge in economic growth and stability took shape in numerous forms during the 1990s through the beginnings of the 2000s decade: Americans enjoyed the longest sustained period of economic growth since the end of WWII; GDP grew at 4% annually; unemployment reached a quarter-century low of 4.7%; inflation fell to less than 2%; the Digital Revolution accounted for 45% of industrial growth; the resulting tax revenue allowed the federal and many state governments to balance their budgets after years of operating in the red; the federal government reported a surplus for the first time in
three decades with an excess of $70 billion for the 1998 fiscal year; the Dow Jones Industrial Average increased fourfold between 1992 and 1998; and America’s software industry accounted for three-fourths of the world market, with nine of the world’s ten biggest software companies located in the U.S.\textsuperscript{7} The increasing role of globalization in economic growth and commerce in tandem with the boom in computer and digital technologies and industries provided incredible economic growth and stability for the United States. The Digital Revolution ushering in such profound changes to society and the world via the internet, personal computers, and cellular phones, made substantial contributions to hip hop becoming not only a national but global phenomenon.

While hip hop culture (in its formative conception) traces its origins to the late 1970s (sometimes as early as 1973), throughout the 1980s, hip hop culture still remained a marginalized subculture despite appearing occasionally in mainstream mediums. As its epicenter, New York City defined hip hop’s characteristics and cultural identity, and hip hop remained “primarily a New York phenomenon in its early years.”\textsuperscript{8} Initially degraded variously as a fad destined to die off or as an art form undeserving of the title “music,” hip hop slowly and methodically made substantial gains. It rapidly moved from its first commercialized song in 1979 (“Rapper’s Delight” by Sugar Hill Gang)\textsuperscript{9} to emphatically demonstrating its ability to stay enmeshed in America’s culture during its Golden Age (~1985~1990).

The Golden Age garners praise even today for its creativity, ingenuity, and prowess.\textsuperscript{10} As scholar Adam Bradley explains of the Golden Age: “If hip-hop music can be said, like jazz, to

\textsuperscript{8} Ed. Adam Bradley, and Andrew DuBois, \textit{The Anthology of Rap} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 119.
\textsuperscript{10} Ed. Adam Bradley, and Andrew DuBois, \textit{The Anthology of Rap} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 119-121.
have songs considered ‘standards,’ then a disproportionate number of them can be credited to artists who emerged in this period. The [artists] of this era hover over hip-hop to this day.” The advancement and expansion of the beats and rhymes of this period should not be underestimated. Many popular subgenres and styles, such as ‘conscious rap’ (the Native Tongues movement) and ‘gangsta rap,’ draw its origins from this period, and many highly important and successful artists draw their own roots and inspirations from artists and music created during this time. For example, RZA, mastermind of the immensely successful Wu-Tang Clan, said in 1993: “Now ’87, now that’s my favorite shit god...Everything was lovely man.” Years later, Nas referenced the power and mystique of the era, and rapped: “like we bringing ’88 back.” In his commentary on the music video for the song, Nas explained the mystique of ’88 in the following way: “The music Salaam Remi put together was like, nostalgic to the ’88 days, which was like the end. Where rap music had ended for a while, then was reborn again in ’94...A lot of the artists...just stopped doing it, the way they were in the early 80s. Toward the end of the 80s was like the biggest point...So it was like ‘let’s bring ‘88 back’ with that one.” RZA and Nas’s statements indicate how much esteem and nostalgia later artists held for the Golden Age.

Not only the artists blazed new trails and set foundations for the coming eras, but also the labels, entrepreneurs, and businessmen who shaped a new industry, and started a new model and precedence of success for later ones to follow. Though active in its formative years, Russell Simmons and his Def Jam label did not exercise their full fame and influence until they rose to prominence during the Golden Age of rap music. Russell Simmons’s accomplishments deserve

recognition for a variety of reasons. He attained notoriety for his business acumen and successes. He demonstrated the ability to create and set trends, not only commercially, but also artistically and culturally as a result of the commercial breakthroughs from his label’s sales and its artists. He gained respect as an intelligent, motivated, and highly successful black business owner who elevated the status of not only hip hop culture, but also black men in the music industry. Lastly, his artists attained a degree of success and notoriety unrivaled in previous times, and many went on to be emblematic hip hop artists themselves (such as Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Public Enemy, Beastie Boys, and others). In short, much as Barry Gordy did with his Motown label in Detroit in the 1960s, Russell Simmons replicated the success and genre changing influence of Gordy with his Def Jam label in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s.

The distinguishing element between Gordy and Simmons, was that while Gordy believed music’s purpose was to sell, not necessarily to express feelings or potentially divisive sentiments, Simmons allowed his artists the freedom to express feelings or potentially divisive sentiments, and yet still managed to sell a lot. Telling Rolling Stone in 1990, “What we try and do is get what’s real from [rappers] and sell that,” Simmons believed in an intrinsic and aesthetic value to music beyond just mere commercial viability, and this led to more lenience in terms of the freedom he gave his artists to express themselves, while lending credence to the quality and authenticity of his artists’ pursuits.

Other artists and labels from New York also attained status during the Golden Age. Among the most notable artists, because of their influence and ability to set trends, included Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Eric B. & Rakim, Public Enemy, Beastie Boys, the Juice Crew All-Stars, KRS-One, Slick Rick, MC Lyte, EPMD, and many others. All are noteworthy because of

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17 This group included super-producer Marley Marl, and legendary MCs like Big Daddy Kane and Kool G Rap.
their influence on later artists and contributions to hip hop’s advancement as a cultural movement. Run-DMC is credited as the first rappers featured on MTV and the first to go platinum.\footnote{Run-DMC, \textit{Greatest Hits} (New York: BMG Heritage/Arista, 2002). The back of the CD also proclaims: “Run-DMC defined the sound and vision of old-school hip hop…Music in America would not be what it is today without Run-DMC.” They also gained recognition as the first rappers featured on the cover of \textit{Rolling Stone} magazine.} LL Cool J, as the prototypical B-boy, or break-beat boy, one who danced to and lived hip hop music as a lifestyle, influenced an entire generation of MCs.\footnote{Ed. Alan Light, \textit{VIBE} (New York: Time Publishing Ventures, Inc.), March 1997, vol. 5, no. 2, 79-81.} Eric B. & Rakim for a time personified and represented the highest level of mastery for their respective crafts in deejaying and emceeing, while setting the bar higher for all acts to follow.\footnote{Tom Terrell, “Liner Notes” in \textit{Eric B. & Rakim – Follow the Leader} (Santa Monica, CA: Geffen Records, 2005), reissue compact disc, 3-4, 6.} Public Enemy not only achieved status as a radical and politically outspoken rap group, but also took credit for influencing and spawning at least two other super groups–NWA in Los Angeles and the Geto Boys in Houston. The Beastie Boys proved that whites could play a part in hip hop culture and gain acceptance from the hip hop nation as active participants.\footnote{Ed. Adam Bradley, and Andrew DuBois, \textit{The Anthology of Rap} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 123.}

The rich diversity of artists emerging from the Golden Age set the foundation for hip hop’s expansion into the mainstream and national consciousness of America. During the Golden Age, to quote Adam Bradley, “rap began to expand its regional parameters…The hip-hop industry also expanded, as major labels began to see opportunities for profit in the music. And rap finally broke through to the pop charts and MTV.”\footnote{Ibid., 119.} Adam Bradley added, “It was a rich time for rap…proving that an art form that had only a few years before been dismissed by some skeptics as a fad was in fact real and self-sustainable.”\footnote{Ibid., 129.}

Artists who emerged from New York City during the Golden Age set the trends and styles for hip hop culture. The Juice Crew’s collective of members influenced later artists and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{note1} Run-DMC, \textit{Greatest Hits} (New York: BMG Heritage/Arista, 2002). The back of the CD also proclaims: “Run-DMC defined the sound and vision of old-school hip hop…Music in America would not be what it is today without Run-DMC.” They also gained recognition as the first rappers featured on the cover of \textit{Rolling Stone} magazine.
\bibitem{note4} Ed. Adam Bradley, and Andrew DuBois, \textit{The Anthology of Rap} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 123.
\bibitem{note5} Ibid., 119.
\bibitem{note6} Ibid., 129.
\end{thebibliography}
producers, ranging from Wu-Tang to Jay-Z, who sought to uphold and replicate this legacy.24 KRS-One likewise initiated “socially conscious” messages hitherto untouched by previous artists. He also gained distinction as the first rap artist to pose on his album cover with a gun in hand. Additionally he took credit (alongside Scholly D’s 1987 album Saturday Night) for giving birth to ‘gangsta rap’ with his debut album Criminal Minded (1987).25 Slick Rick’s contributions to rap music storytelling led to later artists covering his songs even years later, such as Snoop Dogg’s cover of “La Di Da Di” and Notorious B.I.G.’s rendition of his lines for the chorus of “Hypnotize.”26 MC Lyte helped pave the way for the acceptance of women in hip hop.27 Lastly, EPMD popularized the use of funk samples for rap music, along with their protégé, Redman, which Dr. Dre would later draw from to develop and create what would become the distinctive West Coast sound.28

Abundant examples of such a phenomenon as hip hop spreading with national and global implications appear throughout the 1990s, and especially toward 1995-98. Controversies surrounding the role of rap music within society allowed hip hop’s presence to involve itself in the political arena, especially during the presidential elections in 1992 and 1996. President Clinton attempted to appeal to young and minority voters by appearing on the Arsenio Hall show, a show much lauded by hip hop audiences.29 Meanwhile his opponents tried using his

24 One obvious connection is the organized crime angle and motif established by Juice Crew member Kool G Rap’s 1992 album Live and Let Die. This was later replicated with great success by Wu-Tang member Raekwon’s 1995 album Only Built 4 Cuban Linx... and on Jay-Z’s 1996 album Reasonable Doubt. It is important to also note the now multiplatinum and classic status of both albums, as well as the fact that both albums were the debut albums for both artists. Also, both artists make no secret of Kool G’s influence on themselves as artists.
tactics of winning support from minorities and youth to attack him, and appeal to conservative voters. Rap artist Nas later said: “Rap became a version of Malcolm [X] and Martin [Luther King, Jr.].” In other words, hip hop represented the leadership of a national socio-cultural movement with the potential of influencing America’s—or even other countries’—social and political arenas, with the hip hop nation as its constituency. Obviously this idea found great appeal within the hip hop nation because, if true, it demonstrated their culture and music’s power.

Figure 2: Bill Clinton appears on the Arsenio Hall Show.

Hip hop music and culture also drew attention from the American political arena, and this phenomenon—hip hop gaining the attention of or influencing the political arena—replicated in

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31 This picture is found in Steven M. Gillon and Cathy D. Mason, The American Experiment: A History of the United States (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 1273. Additionally, many rappers make a point of how significant Arsenio Hall’s show was, as it represented a potent example of the progress African-Americans made in television, as he was the first and best example of a black late night talk show host. A Tribe Called Quest said on The Low End Theory: “Let everybody know, I get more props than the Arsenio Hall show.” De La Soul said on De La Soul is Dead: “Arsenio dissed us but the crowd kept clapping.” Diamond D said on Stunts, Blunts, and Hip Hop: “Do you watch Arsenio?” Finally, more than a decade later, Nas said on Untitled: “Bring back Arsenio/hip hop was aborted so Nas breathes life back into the embryo.” These showcase the symbolic weight Arsenio Hall carried for hip hop fans and artists.
other places around the world. President Clinton used tactics in 1992 to win support from certain demographics, and he used similar tactics again to help him win re-election in 1996.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Political Cartoon of Bill Clinton in \emph{The Source}.}\textsuperscript{33}
\end{figure}

To magazines like \emph{VIBE} and \emph{The Source} hip hop demonstrated it could effectively influence politics, or at the very least gain the attention of society and force governments and peoples to respond in some way to it, not only at home, but also abroad. To these magazines and many of the hip hop nation’s participants, hip hop, during the late 1980s and through the 1990s, demonstrated its usefulness as a political tool, or vehicle for social change. Likewise, in Russia, Boris Yeltsin used hip hop to appeal to voters while his opponents denounced hip hop’s cultural values, and the magazine article on this proclaimed it signified the “use of popular culture


generally and rap music specifically as a political tool.”34 Again, in the eyes of the nationally syndicated hip hop magazines, the appearance of hip hop as a political issue in Russia, demonstrated the legitimacy, value, and international appeal of the culture and music as a movement. In France, the group Supreme NTM made NWA’s infamous letter from the FBI look tame by comparison, when they actually got arrested and went to prison for making songs criticizing the government, and advocating the murder of police officers who wrongfully engaged in police brutality.35 In the eyes of many constituents in the hip hop nation, hip hop culture’s global presence authenticated and validated the powerful appeal of its cultural beliefs.

As hip hop expanded due to the breakthroughs, successes, and developments established during the Golden Age, hip hop boosters began to imagine they had global influence. In 1997, a writer from The Source wrote, “These days we’ve got rap and hip-hop heads all across the atlas and in virtually all walks of life. That’s worldwide culture for ya’ ass.”36 By 1995, magazines like The Source and VIBE paid particular attention to rap music and hip hop culture’s advancement as a world phenomenon. In their eyes, it demonstrated the validity, legitimacy, value, and universality of hip hop culture and its music. Hip hop culture spread both in the midst of, and well beyond, the boundaries of race and nationality, soon proving itself more versatile than even powerful movements like pan-Africanism. “I saw in Solaar something that’s common with Black people all over the world: the ability to take what little they have and make something really beautiful from it. That’s what hip hop is all about and Solaar, being born in Senegal and raised in France, understands that,” wrote Fab Five Freddy, a known ‘ambassador of hip hop culture,’ on the French artist MC Solaar’s 1994 album. “The thing that blows me away is how the messages and the keys to expression that were developed and molded more than 10

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years ago in New York, are used by Solaar to open doors and open people’s eyes to his own experience…If you think about it, Black people who speak French or another language can’t necessarily understand rap coming out of the states, but they understand the larger messages and translate those keys into their own world.”

In this way, people from other countries demonstrated an ability to shape the hip hop they listened to.

How could a sub-culture from an underprivileged, urbanized community in the South Bronx, in just a few decades, transform into the soundtrack, the style, the art, and the dominant culture for youths not only throughout America, but throughout the entire world? In many ways, 1995-1998 represented a magical era of technological advancement, particularly with respect to computers. One textbook recalled: “In 1995, for the first time, the amount of money spent on PCs exceeded that spent on televisions.”

During this time numerous other examples of this relentless advancement unfolded. By 1999 Americans sent 2.2 billion email messages per day, compared with 293 million pieces of first-class mail. Even companies like Amazon.com, within three years following its launch in 1996, boasted 2.25 million worldwide customers and annual sales reaching $350 million. Again, by 1999 more than 50 million people used the

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39 In Germany this past summer the author asked some local people in Berlin around his age who they thought the best rapper was, and without hesitation most said Tupac. Several years ago while on vacation in Costa Rica, the author found to his surprise a restaurant where they were playing Guru’s Jazzmatazz Vol. 2 (1995). Also cars by the beach bumped Tupac’s All Eyez on Me (1996), and Notorious B.I.G. and Bone Thugs-N-Harmony’s “Notorious Thugs” off of Life After Death (1997). Despite it being well into the 2000s and later, these seminal works being played came from this 1995-1998 era. Even last year in China, on some down time playing basketball in a park, the author dialoged at length about hip hop to a local, dressed in flashy red AND 1 sports apparel, who surprised me with his incredible depth of knowledge on American hip hop artists like Gangstarr, Public Enemy, Pete Rock & CL Smooth, Wu-Tang Clan, Tupac, Biggie, Nas, Jay-Z, and countless others. For this author, all of these examples demonstrated the inclusionary appeal of hip hop culture and its music, across national, language, ethnic, class, and ideological barriers.
internet annually, and this rate nearly doubled each year for an extended range of time. This computer and internet revolution changed how Americans did almost everything, from business and commerce to education and social interaction. When rap artist Nas created his album *Hip Hop is Dead*, he included a track wherein as a detective he encounters and converses with a woman who metaphorically epitomizes hip hop. Among other questions dealing with her origins and development, Nas asked her: “Who’s your sponsor lady? She said ‘Bill Gates’.” Nas said this to signify the importance of the growth in computer technologies helping hip hop expand within the mainstream. Ultimately the unprecedented and impressive growth of computer and digital technologies during this time afforded an incredible opportunity for hip hop’s expansion, spread, and prominence.

The boom of digital technologies and the internet largely enabled the widespread dissemination of such values and cultural elements as those found in hip hop. Furthermore, for many years up through the present time, American music and movies have dominated abroad. When hip hop moved toward a greater immersion into mediums of commercialization, via the music industry, movies, television, fashion and clothing, magazines, even comic books and later politics, it enabled hip hop to also partake in the advantages of national and hence globalized exposure.

Hip hop stars, by crossing into film, signified hip hop’s crossing into film on a scale never seen before; and of course, when distributed on a worldwide scale, with soundtracks to each of these films, including those star’s music, meant more exposure for hip hop culture and

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44 Ibid., 1291.
During the 1990s, popular culture emerged as America’s biggest export. By 1996, international sales of software and entertainment products totaled $60.2 billion, more than any other industry,” mentions a college history text noting the growth of the entertainment industries. “American corporations moved aggressively to tap into the new markets. The Blockbuster Video chain opened 2,000 outlets in 26 foreign countries during the decade; Tower Records operated 70 stores in 15 countries.”

Movie and music industries expanding meant hip hop also expanded, and certainly provided yet another medium through which hip hop expanded its influence on a global scale.

Several hip hop celebrities after becoming famous in the hip hop world, moved on to become famous on TV and movie screens as well. The growth of artists like Will Smith, who originally started out in hip hop as part of the group DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince, helped to personify hip hop’s growth into the forefront of the mainstream. He went first from the television show The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990-1996) to later a Hollywood megastar in blockbuster movies like Independence Day (1996) and Men in Black (1997). Many others, such as Queen Latifah (Set it Off 1996), Ice Cube (Boyz ‘N the Hood 1991, Friday 1995), MC Eiht (Menace II Society 1993), and Ice-T (New Jack City 1991) also made successful jumps from hip hop star to movie star. While some never made a successful career out of acting, a surprising number did, in some cases actually surpassing their music careers.

Tupac Shakur himself followed this process, gaining recognition and acclaim from film critics while amplifying his respect from hip hop fans, with starring performances in movies such as Juice 1992, Poetic Justice 1993, Above the Rim 1994, Gridlock’d 1996, Bullet 1996, and

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47 Ibid., 289.
Gang Related 1997. Therefore, fellow rapper Scarface rapped: “I’m like ‘Pac, I make a mil[lion dollars] but I still live the ‘thug life’. ”\textsuperscript{48} Scarface’s quote means some rappers could in some instances still remain true to their culture’s beliefs and not compromise hip hop’s original values or traditional conceptions of integrity, despite commercial success in the mainstream.

Furthermore, magazines \textit{VIBE} and \textit{The Source} carried stories about hip hop spreading abroad and its involvement in the lives of the people living there, usually in underprivileged countries and places, which hip hop felt an inextricable connection with.\textsuperscript{49} Again, in the eyes of these magazines and many in the hip hop nation, stories about hip hop’s presence and influence in other countries demonstrated a perceived validity, legitimacy, value, and universality of hip hop’s culture and music.\textsuperscript{50}

This theme of hip hop’s global power and influence finds prevalence throughout the hip hop nation during the 1990s. “The Black and North African people took to hip hop right away….Where [artist MC] Solaar’s from [Senegal and then France], racism is just as prominent. They’re all suffering from the same madness and the kids over there are really feeling it,” wrote hip hop pioneer and global ambassador Fab Five Freddy about hip hop’s global expansion. “To me, hip hop is culture that goes beyond music, art and dance. It’s a culture that grows in the petri dish of a high pressure, fast urban environment…Now is the time for people everywhere to sit up and listen.”\textsuperscript{51} Hip hop’s global prominence demonstrated to the hip hop nation, provided

\begin{footnotesize}
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testament to, and actual proof of its culture and music’s universality, appeal, power, influence, and staying power.\textsuperscript{52} For many this also validated its integrity as an art form.

As another example of this fixation on hip hop’s global presence and influences, letters from readers in \textit{The Source} and \textit{VIBE} sometimes included people from countries outside of the U.S. When Tupac died, for example, readers from African countries, such as South Africa or Ghana, wrote letters which appeared in the magazines. One of these read: “We lost one of the most influential rappers in the world. He is greatly missed by all of us in Africa.”\textsuperscript{53} Even people outside of the U.S., like many national fans, commented on the stupidity of the bicoastal war in America, while the media outlets continued fanning the flames.\textsuperscript{54} The fact nationally syndicated magazines like \textit{VIBE} and \textit{The Source} received and published mail from people of other countries demonstrated how seriously these magazines and their readers viewed hip hop’s global presence, evidencing its universality, influence, and authenticity across national and cultural boundaries.

One of the best stories conveying American hip hop’s influence on people outside of America comes from Ishmael Beah. Ishmael Beah, a rehabilitated child soldier from the Sierra Leone civil wars of the 1990s, included in his biography several important parts about how hip hop remained a powerful influence in his life and subsequent rehabilitation. In his life before his involvement as a child soldier in the war, he remembered having started a rap and dance group with his friends at the age of eight, participating in talent shows, memorizing songs such as “Rapper’s Delight” by Sugar Hill Gang and “I Know You Got Soul” by Eric B. & Rakim, and


\textsuperscript{53} This particular reader’s statement is found in Ed. Alan Light, \textit{VIBE} (New York: Time Publishing Ventures, Inc.), March 1997, vol. 5, no. 2, 42-47.

\textsuperscript{54} Mathematik from Montreal, Canada is one example in Ed. Adario Strange, \textit{The Source} (New York: Source Publications, Inc.), July 1996, no. 82, 14.
described the allure the music held for him and his friends.\textsuperscript{55} After war broke out, he recalled in one event how having a Nature by Nature tape and playing their song “O.P.P.” convinced their captors to spare the lives of him and his friends.\textsuperscript{56} When he faced induction as a child soldier, they burned his old possessions to separate him from his previous identity and experiences, but when they burned his hip hop cassettes, “Tears formed in my eyes, and my lips shook as I turned away.”\textsuperscript{57} He vividly remembered murdering another child soldier who “wore a Tupac Shakur T-shirt that said: ‘All eyes on me’.”\textsuperscript{58} Later when UNICEF attempted to rehabilitate him, they successfully used rap music to reconnect him with his previous identity, and help him heal from his traumatic endeavors to the point where he could forgive himself for his crimes and function normally in society again.\textsuperscript{59} While Beah’s story goes far beyond a typical experience, it does demonstrate hip hop’s potent influence on people in Africa.\textsuperscript{60} Also, his own life and survival at times depended upon the strong connections he formed with hip hop music and culture. Hip hop’s global presence meant events taking place in America within hip hop culture and its music impacted people throughout the world.

Hip hop progressed from the periphery of society during the Golden Age of the late 1980s and rode the wave of incredible American economic growth and the explosion of internet and computer technologies to national and international prominence in mainstream society. Hip hop scholar Adam Bradley noted: “Rap began the decade [1990] as a decidedly East Coast–even specifically New York–phenomenon and would end it as a national, and even an international,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ishmael Beah, \textit{A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier} (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007), 6-7.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 66-68. They needed to prove themselves not soldiers or mercenaries, or they would face death from scared villagers who suspected them as child soldiers. Due to his tape, the village chief eventually became convinced of their innocence.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 110.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 119. This is the name of Tupac’s 1996 album.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 154, 160, 163, 166.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 193. Though he eventually took up permanent residence there, he says at one point: “My conception of New York City came from rap music.” Surprisingly, he actually thought of it as more dangerous and scary than what he experienced in Sierra Leone, until he actually arrived there and saw it being much safer than back home.
\end{itemize}
art.” Its growth and prevalence as it spread across the nation and the globe marked its rise from periphery of society to mainstream and worldwide commercialization.

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CHAPTER III

DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIFIC REGIONAL STYLES AND SOUNDS WITHIN HIP HOP MUSIC AND CULTURE

As hip hop spread nationally, the people in the areas it spread sought to make hip hop more their own by crafting and shaping it to relate specifically to the realities, cultural identities, and distinctiveness of the places they lived. At first lyrical content was the defining feature of hip hop and its regional origins, but as technology advanced, and the music developed into a more widespread prominence, soon not only the lyrics, but also the sample choices and musical arrangements developed into a defining feature.

By virtue of its creation in the South Bronx in the 1970s, hip hop culture and music from its inception embodied hip hop style. This original style of hip hop culture and music found itself retroactively redefined over time, first as East Coast, and later as New York style, as a result of its spread across the United States. Due to its inextricable link with analog and later digital technology, early hip hop music appears sparse and limited in its sonic presentation, compared to later times and possibilities. During and throughout the 1980s, rap music retained a decidedly East Coast feel, sound, and presentation, regardless of where it played or who created it. For example, many people outside of New York who made beats and rhymes possessed obvious connections and ties with New York and replicated a reasonable facsimile of the style. Meanwhile the biggest difference between regional musical styles and arrangements remained

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62 An oversimplified way to classify the three regional styles and sounds of the 1990s:
East Coast – Highest Lyrical Complexity, Lowest Beat Complexity (Boom-Bap)
West Coast – Moderate Lyrical Complexity, Moderate Beat Complexity (G-Funk)
Dirty South – Lowest Lyrical Complexity, Highest Beat Complexity (Dirty South/Crunk)
the identity of the MCs and their subject matter. Later, regions beyond New York opted to experiment with their own versions of the hip hop sound. The West Coast, as the first, most influential and most prominent sound and style to generate its own distinctive identities and sounds, challenged the East Coast’s domination and trend setting.

Though active and known artists existed in the West Coast throughout the 1980s, not until Dr. Dre’s groundbreaking 1992 album, *The Chronic*, did the West Coast claim to own a particular distinctive and identifiable style. Unlike its previous manifestations, this new regional style of the West Coast did not limit its musical identity to just poetical and lyrical expression from the MCs, but now instead included musical, artistic, and conceptual traits formulated by its producers. Artists who emerged on the West Coast during the 1980s, such as Ice-T, Too $hort, and NWA, all relied upon production today largely classified as the East Coast sound. It sounds minimalist, it draws from a broad array of samples and arrangements already popularized by the East Coast, and its sonic presentation often abounds with particular emphasis on the percussive aspect rather than the other instruments or sounds or new arrangements. In part, the minimalist, repetitive nature of the looped beats helped accentuate the attention and emphasis placed on the lyrics for the listener. Initially, the lyrical subject matter—which placed a heavier emphasis on incendiary content, vulgarity and curse words, as well as gangbanging—made these West Coast artists special from their counterparts on the East Coast. Despite this lyrical distinction, West Coast hip hop still bore remarkable similarities in its instrumentation and sounds, sometimes purposely, in order to gain legitimacy and acceptance from the East Coast originators.

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66 Brian Coleman, *Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip Hop Junkies* (New York: Villard Books, 2007), 236-242. Ice-T mentions how important his relationship and appealing to New York sensibilities was to his success and acceptance several times. Afrika Islam made it a point to introduce Ice-T to New York’s hip hop cognoscenti, such
NWA, with *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), emerged as the most important artists to hail from the West Coast in the late 1980s. Eazy E created Ruthless Records, allegedly using funds from selling crack, and formed NWA, one of the most controversial groups of its time. In time, NWA established itself as every bit as controversial as their East Coast counterparts, Public Enemy, but for very different reasons, such as what the groups stood for in their images and messages.

Ice Cube emerged as NWA’s biggest star, but because of contractual and personal disputes, Ice Cube broke away from the group in the very early 1990s, and teamed up with the Bomb Squad, the production group responsible for Public Enemy’s beats. While Cube definitely identified himself as a West Coast artist, the creation of his beats by East Coast producers did little to help distinguish his beats from East Coast stylistics. This bears similar resemblance to how Ice-T’s producer (Afrika Islam) also hailed from New York and made East Coast style beats. While commercial success paved the way for his involvement in acting and Hollywood, Cube could not articulate the West Coast’s identity beyond his image and lyrics, and the West Coast still lacked a distinctive sound from its Eastern counterparts, until Dr. Dre released *The Chronic.*

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69 KRS-One actually mentions Afrika Islam by name as one of the hip hop pioneers on the East Coast, on “South Bronx,” from Boogie Down Production’s classic 1987 album *Criminal Minded,* when he says: “I know a few understand what I’m talking about/Remember Bronx River rolling thick/with Kool DJ Red Alert and Chuck Chillout on the mix/where Afrika Islam was rocking the jams/and on the other side of town was a kid named [Grand Master] Flash…it was ’76-1980.” The point here is that Ice-T’s producer Afrika Islam was undeniably an East Coast producer.
Dr. Dre on the other hand, expressed himself both musically and lyrically as an East Coast artist on NWA’s recordings. Even on *Straight Outta Compton*, Dre sounds every bit as East Coast an MC as one from New York in his style. Yet, four years later he split from NWA and formed the independent label, Death Row Records, with Marion “Suge” Knight, and released *The Chronic*.

As both an MC and producer, Dre not only changed his image and lyrics, but also his sound for *The Chronic*. Like fellow producer/MCs RZA and Havoc on the East Coast who helped define the sound of their region by creating both beats and rhymes, Dre took a privileged position in creating the region’s identity through his image, lyrics, and sound. However, unlike Havoc or RZA, Dre not only simplified his rhyme style to appeal more, but also musically created what came to be called “G-Funk.” It took many samples from George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic, Bootsy Collins, Bernie Worrell, and many other funk musicians, which East Coast artists such as EPMD and Redman already did years before or near the exact same time; but Dre mixed and arranged the samples in a very different and more complex way than previously, and Dre sported a far more gangsta-esque persona (hence G-Funk = gangsta funk) with help from his new protégé Snoop Doggy Dogg. Dre’s production signaled the beginning of the ‘rolling bass’ trend, which also helped to shape as distinctive the West Coast sound, and also led somewhat indirectly, along with other artists following this trend, to the emphasis of bass in both house and car stereo speakers for music producers.

The remarkable success of *The Chronic* served as the prototype for nearly all West Coast productions to follow. Along with Snoop Dogg’s even more successful *Doggystyle* the following

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71 For example, EPMD used plenty of funk based samples on their classics, *Strictly Business* (1988) and *Unfinished Business* (1989), while Redman, their protégé, on his album debut, *What? Thee Album* (1992), used samples from Parliament Funkadelic and other funk artists as well.
year (which Dre also produced), Dre effectively birthed the West Coast sound and style, and, with Suge Knight, established Death Row Records as the eminent independent record label for the West Coast. Later the West Coast’s challenge to the East Coast’s prototypical stylistics forced the East to reformulate their own sounds and styles and accordingly modify their previous identities in response.

Facing challenges to its authenticity and dealing with backsliding in its reputation for quality and realness, the New York artists of the 1990s, especially following 1993, in part due to the emergence of a West Coast sound via *The Chronic* (1992) and *Doggystyle* (1993), felt they needed to reaffirm and reestablish their identities musically. They embraced an even grittier, grimier, darker, more menacing, and more noir style of sonic landscapes, and sought to reestablish their reputation for lyrical supremacy. In a representative example of these feelings, Fat Joe pointed out the significance of Nas’s East Coast classic, *Illmatic* (1994), for rekindling and answering the West Coast’s challenge. Almost ten years later, rapper Fat Joe speculated in *The Source*: “The West Coast was representing [like] crazy and New York needed representation. Here came the god. Rakim was lyrical about everything and the beats just happened to be crazy. Nas never made nothing for a party–it was gritty.” 72 The relevance of this quote rests with how Fat Joe looked at the competitive reputations and ‘quality representation’ rivalry between the East and West Coasts. Fat Joe also emphasized how Nas’s lyrical ability put perceptions of lyrical supremacy back in the East Coast’s favor, and signaling the return, actively and retrospectively, of the East Coast having the best and most complex lyrical skills, and restoring this aspect of lyrical supremacy as part of the East Coast’s identity. This is especially apparent in the form of three fundamental 1993 East Coast albums: Onyx’s *Bacdafucup*, Black Moon’s *Enta da Stage*, and Wu-Tang Clan’s *Enter the 36 Chambers*. From there, the dark, gritty, 

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When considering these albums, producers like RZA (a member of Wu-Tang Clan) and Havoc (a member of Mobb Deep) helped start the trend and involved themselves in a surprising number of these later projects; while the newcomers, such as Trackmasters (who produced *It Was Written*) and Swizz Beats (who produced *It’s Dark and Hell is Hot*), initially largely followed in their footsteps. It became so prevalent a sound within a few short years that RZA felt the need to express his dismay at such a widespread copying of the style he helped to invent and popularize on the intro to *Forever’s* second disc: “We come out with a style and everybody wanna imitate our style. And all you producers out there…it’s all good to show love to a nigga, but stop bitin’ [copying] my shit [style/sound]…come from your own heart with this shit [music/sound]…We told you niggas on the fucking [Only Built 4] Cuban Linx [1995] album don’t bite [copy] our shit. Y’all niggas keep bitin’ [copying].”\(^73\) RZA felt upset that, despite

warning MCs and producers on previous albums not to copy his own or his group’s style, people from all over the map, even globally, but especially on the East Coast, were imitating and copying these styles. Regardless of RZA’s unhappiness about the mainstream and widespread adoption of his style of sound, by 1997, the East Coast sound pioneered in 1993 materialized as the iconic music for the region. However, the West Coast’s challenge to the East Coast’s prototypical stylistics also opened the door for other regions and cities around the country to experiment with their own ideas. Hence, the South provided another example as they emerged with their own distinctive sound for hip hop during 1995-98.

The Houston, Texas-based Geto Boys gain acknowledgement as one of the first and best examples of a rap group really making waves for the South’s recognition as a region, but like NWA before them, their beats sounded fairly East Coast, despite having lyrical content and subject-matter different enough to distinguish them from their counterparts on either the East or West Coasts. Their two classic works, Grip It! On that Other Level (1990) and We Can’t Be Stopped (1991), pushed the envelope for controversy well beyond either their most inflammatory Eastern or Western counterparts. Yet, in spite of their inflammatory subject matter, vulgarity, sexually explicit lyrics, and even more “gangstafied” image, they still mainly relied on beats that sounded remarkably East Coast. Even though Florida’s 2 Live Crew, with their own independent label, Luke Skyywalker Records, helped to promote the over-the-top sexual innuendo and vulgarity, such as with the album As Nasty as They Wanna Be (1989), they also relied upon a producer/DJ with East Coast leanings. Nevertheless, the Geto Boys formed under Rap-A-Lot.

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74 The track RZA is specifically referencing on Raekwon’s Only Built 4 Cuban Linx… (1995) album, is the skit entitled, “Shark Niggas [Biters],” where Ghostface Killah and Raekwon indict, discourage, and disrespect artists who copy styles in the hip hop world, concluding that if one is original, unique, and dedicated, they’ll come up, or make it to the mainstream, on the merits of their own creativity and hard work.


Records, an independent label owned by black entrepreneur J. Prince and following the commercial and critical successes of the Geto Boys’s albums helped to establish the Rap-A-Lot family as one of the great independent labels outside of New York and California. Within a few years J. Prince propelled his label successfully beyond even Luke Skywalker’s own independent, Florida-based label.

Greater abundance of profanity compared to their West Coast counterparts (honestly a feat in and of itself), and more vulgar, sexually explicit lyrics, marked the Southern lyrical style even more so than even their West Coast counterparts. Nonetheless, Atlanta, Georgia’s burgeoning hip hop scene defined the South’s sound artistically and commercially. In Atlanta, Antonio “L.A.” Reid’s LaFace Records emerged as a titan of the South’s record labels, due to the help of the groups Outkast and Goodie Mob, as well as the sonic team most often behind the music to these groups: Organized Noize Productions. Outkast and Goodie Mob gained enormous respect artistically, commercially, critically, and musically for their debut albums, *Southernplayalisticadillacmusik* (1994) and *Soul Food* (1995), which included guest appearances from either group, as well as production from Organized Noize Productions. Their first albums, again, sound remarkably East Coast in terms of production, despite interesting creativity and distinctiveness in their southern style of lyricism. This is perhaps one reason that they experienced such success both within and outside of their region. Of great importance, though geographically situated on the East Coast, Atlanta, Georgia (much like Florida), identified themselves as hailing from the Southern traditions of rap music, despite having production obviously drawing from the New York-based beat stylistics. Yet, as they progressed and

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78 For example, Jay-Z sampled Andre 3000’s lyrics (a tribute and sign of respect) alongside Nas, one of the most respected lyricists of all, on his song “Rap Game/Crack Game,” *In My Lifetime, Vol. 1* (1997), which is evidence of how many on the East Coast readily accepted Outkast and Goodie Mob as respectable artists within the hip hop community, despite not hailing from either California or New York.
matured, the two groups and their beat-makers expanded to a point far beyond the limited scope of New York styles of beats and rhymes, into a world of beats and rhymes dictating and formulating the Southern sound.

Part of Goodie Mob and Outkast’s, as well as Organized Noize’s, initial acceptance outside of Atlanta, dealt with how their highly skillful and lucid lyrical and production talents, matched some of their greatest counterparts on either coast. However, they soon transformed this talent into something entirely new, formulating the blueprint for the South’s sound.79 By the time Outkast released *ATLiens* in 1996, Organized Noize started showing glimpses of the South’s sound materializing. However, not until 1998 did the distinctive Southern sound, sometimes called “crunk,” appear in Goodie Mob’s and Outkast’s albums, *Still Standing* and *Aquemini*.

Outkast used live instruments ranging from African drummers to horn sections to non-traditional instruments like harmonicas, which do not usually appear in hip hop music; they dived deeper into the musical presentation than anyone in rap ever did; and they sounded completely unlike anything ever recorded in rap music while retaining their southern identities and stylistics, sonically as well as poetically. Five years after its release, rap artist David Banner wrote the following about the album:

> I look at Outkast as being visionary. They are one of the few groups that show there is dexterity in their music. From the poetry to the live feeling, this album changed the way people look at rap music. They brought in orchestras and African drummers, different types of instruments that you’re not used to hearing in rap music….It’s funny how, in Southern music, for so many years people didn’t want to give us our credit. The truth is, we’re musicians, and that was something hard to find in a rap group. A lot of people are beatmakers; Outkast made music. If you took their lyrics out, the scores are amazing.80

While people on the East Coast like Guru and The Roots already experimented with and made staples of using live instruments, theirs manifested as largely jazz-based in terms of influence.

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79 On Goodie Mob’s *Soul Food* (1995), they coined the term “Dirty South,” as synonymous with the South’s style and sound. Yet again, it still sounded fairly East Coast.

and presentation. East Coast artists such as Guru and The Roots sounded completely different from how Outkast and Organized Noize layered their tracks, organized the sequences and arrangements, and most importantly—rather than being jazz-based or needing to sound dark and gritty—the tracks on *Aquemini* are brighter, fuller, smoother, and not quite as harsh or two-dimensional as those found on the East Coast.

The regionalization of hip hop culture and music helped the commercialization of hip hop. For example, following the successes of Luke Skyywalker Records and Rap-A-Lot Records, LaFace Records’s model then influenced other cities in the southern region to follow suite, making especially noteworthy, the New Orleans-based artist Master P, and his own independent label No Limit Records. One magazine section later noted: “Hip Hop’s entrepreneurial spirit was taken to the next level by Master P’s No Limit. Aside from the 4 million units of his [album] *MP Da Last Don* sold, his label was churning out gold records [500,000 copies sold] biweekly.”81 Before long, the pattern of establishing a regional identity and sound via artists and independent labels grew into an identifiable trend, one which interestingly enough, seemed to follow the model established more than a decade before by Russell Simmons, his Def Jam record label, and his recording artists in New York.

The process began in New York in the mid-1980s, eventually replicated across the major urban centers across the country. This process first started in larger regions, before moving on to more and more localized areas. Meanwhile the progression continued as business savvy entrepreneurs teamed up with artists to regionalize and nationalize hip hop music and culture. Eazy E’s Ruthless label in Los Angeles, Luke Skyywalker’s label in Miami, Dr. Dre’s Death Row label in Los Angeles, Puff Daddy’s (P. Diddy’s) Bad Boy label in New York, J. Prince’s Rap-A-Lot label in Houston, Mannie Fresh’s Cash Money label in New Orleans, E-40’s Sick-

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Wid-It label in Vallejo, Jermaine Dupri’s So So Def label in Atlanta, Master P’s No Limit label in New Orleans, Antonio Reid’s LaFace label in Atlanta, and many others, all seemed to follow the model set by Russell Simmons and Def Jam in New York. This helped pave the way for the commercialization of rap music, while convincing not only the major music industry labels, but also compelling giant corporations in other industries, to notice by 1995 that the time for profiting off of hip hop culture had arrived.

In the mid-1990s with the coastal and stylistic wars going on, the Easterners sought to change the original inclusive messages of the East, to a more exclusive feeling. At one point in 1996, established hip hop radio icon Bobbito Garcia, expressed his dismay over a claim from a line in Westside Connection’s (a group known for fueling antagonisms between the East and West Coasts) song “Westside Slaughterhouse,” where a group member claimed hip hop started in the West Coast, saying: “It also upsets me that he said hip hop started in the West. You know, you can’t change history…saying that is disrespectful to the forefathers. If you’re nice with a mike it doesn’t matter where you’re from.”

Bobbito Garcia attempted to point out, based on rap’s traditional roots, one’s abilities rather than one’s place of origin determined acceptance within the hip hop community, yet he could not forgive the distortion to where hip hop originated from: New York. In hip hop’s beginning stages, New York sought to branch out well beyond its borders, but by the time it branched out across America, it then sought to protect its aesthetic and foundational legacies by continuing to pronounce and extol its virtue as the creator, and originator of the art. “Rap’s geographic expansion had important stylistic implications...Nowhere is this more apparent than in southern rap,” mentioned Adam Bradley. “The South was nearly invisible on the rap landscapes in the 1980s, but by the late 1990s it

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would become arguably the dominant rap region, defying East Coast-West Coast hegemony.”

The dynamic between New York and the rest of the nation changed dramatically from the Golden Age to the 1995-98 period, in a span of barely five to ten years.

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CHAPTER IV

COMMERCIALIZATION AND GOING MAINSTREAM

“The hip hop nation is no different than any other segment of this society in its desire to live the American dream.” – *VIBE*, 1996

For many in the hip hop nation, the “American Dream” meant rewards based on increasing material wealth and prosperity in exchange for unstinting devotion and hard work toward one’s aspirations in work and life. They remained dedicated in their aspirations toward this dream even if it meant undergoing and overcoming serious trials obstructing these goals. The growth of hip hop music throughout the U.S. in the form of independent record labels and regional styles represented only a part of the process of hip hop culture’s expansion. The other part consisted of its mainstream commercialization, in the form of powerful and influential corporations buying into the profitable phenomenon hip hop gradually demonstrated. Hip hop music and culture underwent a process of increasing commercialization since 1979’s “Rapper’s Delight” first commercialized it as a genre, but it took more than a decade before corporations embraced this phenomenon. The floodgates opened between 1995 and 1998.

One indication of the commercialization of hip hop music and culture demonstrated during this period materialized in the form of academic institutions, which actually started buying subscriptions from the few professional magazines on hip hop, like *VIBE* and *The Source*. University of Colorado Boulder for example, began stocking issues of *VIBE* and *The Source* in late 1995 and 1996, which simply meant academia now took particular notice of the culture. This subsequently helped to validate and authenticate hip hop culture and music’s significance on a mainstream level, even thousands of miles from the major urban centers embracing hip hop, such as Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta, or New York City. People in the academic world also gave

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credence to such publications by contributing articles to these publications. This happened on several occasions, such as when Michael Eric Dyson did so for *VIBE* magazine or when opposing scholars Dr. Mary Lefkowitz (leading critic of Afrocentricity) and Dr. Molefi Asante (Chair of African-American studies at Temple) debated Afrocentricity in *The Source*.85

By 1995, thanks largely to the advancements made during the Golden Age of the late 1980s,86 hip hop’s influence then shifted from black youth culture to embracing a broader youth culture, including white suburbanites. This also led to widespread implications, not only for the culture and music, but also for its commercialization and the corporations seeking to exploit it. Before it could do so, however, hip hop needed to confront and overcome two obstacles to this shift from marginalized to massive appeal. First, it needed to appease enough people and companies to counter the negative perceptions and stigmas hip hop carried with it (at least until it proved itself so viable corporations refused to ignore it, even despite such attributes). Second, it needed to expand its market well beyond that of the black community toward a more inclusive and broader youth culture, including whites.

While music and film seemed to open the door to hip hop’s mainstream commercialization, soon other industries, such as fashion, sports, and even beverage makers, opened the floodgates for hip hop. The hip hop nation’s biggest concern stemmed from whether hip hop’s values compromised in lieu of its commercialization, for considerations of style and appearance, instead of retaining its integrity and substance. Nothing seemed to encapsulate this feeling better than the rising prominence and fixation with fashion within hip hop.87

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87 Such considerations abounded throughout *VIBE* and *The Source* during this time. For example, one editorial makes a point of specifically referencing this subject, and expressed misgivings over the commercialization of the music, and problems with trends in the music’s commercialization ranging from the “Mafioso” theme as well as problems with
By the early 1990s, magazines like *The Source* and *VIBE* regularly contained sections pertaining to fashion in the hip hop world (as well as other sections such as sports) and served in the fashion industry’s expansion. Dozens upon dozens of full-page and multiple-page advertisements for fashion companies grace the pages of each issue of both *VIBE* and *The Source* throughout 1995-98 (and up to the present), in addition to regularly featuring an entire section devoted to the subject. These advertisements included both high-end and independent fashion designers and manufacturers as: Hugo Boss, Karl Kani, Tommy Hilfiger, Pelle Pelle, Versus, Emperio Armani, Kangol, Puma, Ralph Lauren, Perry Ellis, Union Bay, Dolce & Gabbana, Lugz, Gasoline, Enyce, Moschino, Fila, Paco, Varsity, Playaz, Calvin Klein, Nike, First Down, Moco, Helly Hansen, South Pole, Sketchers, Adidas, And 1, Marc Echo, Trezeta, Cope, Barcode, Davoucci, Pepe Jeans, Reebok, East Pack, Versace, Octane 98, Rigo Sport, AKU, FUBU, DKNY, and others. So many name-brand manufacturers spending money in select national publications to convince hip hop consumers to buy their merchandise evidences both hip hop’s real and perceived marketability in the fashion industry during the mid to late 1990s. Fashion companies often went out of their way to secure popular recording artists in the genre, ranging from Nas and the Boot Camp Click to L’il Kim and Foxy Brown, for wearing and modeling their clothes in these magazines, and articulated how seriously these companies took their investments in the hip hop market and its consumer base.  

88 Rappers and DJ/producers also embraced fashion, especially high-end fashion, as not only a status symbol and indicator of success, but also as a way to help market themselves. As a result, name brands and expensive fashion, transformed into a highly sought after commodity within the hip hop nation. This proved especially true for, but not limited to, the East Coast and

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embracing fashion where they contend the prevalence of brands such as Moschino, Versace, and DKNY is harmful to hip hop music and its culture. See *The Source*, June 1996, no. 81, 8.
88 For example, see *The Source*, March 1997, no. 90, 90-95.
New York, a noted center for the fashion industry. Fashion helped define one’s location geographically and also linked a rapper with their area and style. In *The Chronic: 2001*, Dr. Dre raps: “I came up in the game wearing khakis not Kangols.”\(^8\) This meant Dr. Dre represented the West Coast because he wore khakis, an LA fashion, not Kangol, which is East Coast fashion.

The Notorious B.I.G. and Raekwon separately both link fashion brands and East Coast haircut styles. B.I.G. raps: “Remember back in the days, when niggas had waves, Cazal shades, and cornbraids.”\(^9\) Raekwon raps: “Back in the days, crime pays in mad [lots of] ways/sporting Tommy Hil[figer] with caves, 360 waves/No more searching for loose ends now I flex [show off my] 300 Benz/mad [lots of] timbs [Timberland boots] with mad [lots of] diamonds/now that’s the life of the good life/I paid the price throughout my hood life.”\(^10\) Both referenced clothing brands (Cazal, Tommy Hilfiger, and Timberland), and both referenced popular hairstyle fashions (waves and cornbraids). For a time, haircut styles could even denote one’s coastal affiliation, as with Jheri curls in the West Coast (worn by NWA for example) or the baldies synonymous with the East Coast (sported by Onyx).\(^11\)

Many hip hop artists rapped about fashion during 1995-98. Nas rapped: “When I dress, it’s never nothing less than Guess.”\(^12\) Big L rapped: “We never bring luggage, we go shopping

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\(^10\) Raekwon, “Can It Be All Simple [Remix],” *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx…* (New York: Loud/BMG/RCA Records, 1995).

\(^11\) Alan Light, *VIBE*’s chief editor, chronicles an account in one of Ice Cube’s albums, telling of how one’s hairstyle designated their place of origin and coastal affiliation, and how Ice Cube used this to his advantage during a performance at Harlem’s Apollo Theatre, where after taking the stage: “The jacket’s hood was snatched back to reveal Ice Cube, the definitive chronicler of Los Angeles street life, wearing a New York Yankees cap. The crowd went bananas. Then he tore off the cap and we could see that Ice Cube had shaved off his trademark jheri curls – the ultimate signifier of West Coast style – and was rocking a Brooklyn-style baldie. Pandemonium.” This demonstrates the connections between fashion and haircut as indicators of regional style, and this excerpt comes from the liner notes booklet in Ice Cube, *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted [Reissue]* (Hollywood, CA: Priority Records, Inc., 1990, 2003). Also see *The Source*, August 2003, No. 167, 100, 148; and *The Source*, June 2006, No. 200, 55, 60.

when the plane lands…I used to be a [Big Daddy] Kane fan/everything I rock [wear] is name-brand.” Both Nas and Big L showcase the importance of fashion as part of their image, and both pointed out they refused to sport anything less than name-brand or expensive fashion. Despite fashion’s widespread adoption within the culture, more than a few fans, magazine writers, and even artists themselves showed signs of dismay over what they saw as a fixation with appearances rather than substance within their music and culture. This, in conjunction with other misgivings complicating the struggle with the culture going mainstream and its commoditizing, only served to increase tensions both within the culture and without. As one of the most notorious examples of fans in the hip hop nation reacting upset about the overuse of the trend, Foxy Brown caught flak for her verse on “Affirmative Action” from Nas’s It Was Written album, because of how she threw in a number of brands during her one verse, including Chevy, Wallabees (expensive loafers), Lexus, Moet Chandon (expensive Champaign), Armani, Carolina Herrera, Mercury, and Cristal (alcohol).

In unusual cases, a clothing brand might court someone personifying authenticity within hip hop culture and use them to promote their product. In one such instance, Louis Vuitton succeeded in courting Grand Master Flash, a legendary hip hop pioneer known for his DJing/producing in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Louis Vuitton’s explicit goal was using Grand Master Flash to help “resurrect” their company’s name and image. This stemmed from a desire to replicate the similar remarkable successes of recent efforts by its competitors, Donna

95 For example, see The Source, June 1996, no. 81, 8; and The Source, January 1997, no. 88, 98-100.
96 See the editorial entitled “Revolutionary Suicide” discussing the problems associating with hip hop “selling out,” and possibly bankrupting its ideologies and what it stands for in VIBE, April 1996, vol. 4, no. 3, 29.
97 Foxy Brown on Nas, “Affirmative Action,” It Was Written (New York: Sony Music Entertainment Inc./Columbia Records, 1996). Also, for example, Jeru the Damaja disrespects Foxy Brown and the commercialization she represents by essentially calling her fake, with the lines: “Foxy Brown sipping Cristal in the background/with fake alligator boots on.” This is found in Jeru the Damaja, “One Day,” Wrath of the Math (New York: Payday/FFRR/Polygram Records, 1996). The author further elaborates on this point in section V.
Karan and Versace. Additionally, in late 1996, Versace estimated 60% of its business came from customers “involved in the urban music scene,” while Dolce & Gabbana estimated 40% of its business did as well. Yet Russell Simmons also bitterly pointed out how it unfortunately represented yet another demonstration of whites getting rich off blacks. At her keynote address for the 2012 Sankofa Lecture Series’ Cultural Literacy Conference, MC Lyte mentioned how the fashion industry changed from the 1980s to the present because of hip hop, and concluded, “Before the European fashion brands set the fashion trends and styles, but nowadays it’s America’s hip hop fashion that influences what runway models in European countries wear.”

Fashion not only exerted an influence on hip hop culture and music, but hip hop music and culture also exerted a great deal of influence on the fashion industry.

One final result of the blending of corporate fashion and mainstream hip hop materialized in the form of business savvy hip hop icons and artists who launched successful clothing lines, either independently or as a branch of an established clothing brand. Naughty by Nature was the first to start the successful trend with its Naughty Gear in the early 1990s. Soon others followed suite, and more than a few grew into successful ventures entirely on its own merits. As early as 1992, Russell Simmons also established his own fashion line, Phat Farm, which itself grew to multimillion dollar proportions by the present day. Wu-Tang Clan introduced its Wu-Wear merchandise soon after its debut album and promoted it on their 1997 album. Meanwhile Ghostface Killah revitalized, almost singlehandedly, Clark’s Wallabee footwear.

101 Ibid.
market with his uncanny fashion sense and entrepreneurial savvy, earning him the title “Wallabee Champ.”

Jay-Z, ever the resourceful and successful businessman, created one of the most prominent and successful labels in hip hop culture with his Rocawear line in 1999. However, perhaps the most successful of all turned out to be “the most successful businessman ever to pick up a mic,” Sean “Puffy” (Puff Daddy/P. Diddy) Combs, CEO of Bad Boy Records. Puff Daddy masterminded and launched Sean John Clothing in 1998. Later, others would continue this trend well into the 2000s, as evidenced by Eminem’s Shady Ltd. and 50 Cent’s G-Unit Clothing Company and Street King clothing lines, although both artist’s ventures eventually folded and became defunct. Nevertheless, the successful launching of certain clothing lines by hip hop artists symbolized the merger of the culture and music with the commercial apparel and fashion industry.

This unexpected shift in mainstream, corporate America’s priorities toward embracing hip hop also surfaced in other spaces beyond the fashion industry. For example Prodigy of Mobb Deep, on a 1998 album, bragged about his commercial power and newfound potential partnerships with corporations: “My rhymes get Ruger endorsements/my song boosts Intertec sales through the ceiling.” Prodigy bragged he was affecting the sales of gun companies when he endorses them, such as with gun manufactures Ruger (maker of the LC9 and RC22 handguns)  


105 References to these developments can even be found on the albums: Raekwon, “Glaciers of Ice,” Only Built 4 Cuban Linx... (New York: Loud/BMG/RCA Records, 1995); and Ghostface Killah, Ironman (New York: Epic Records, 1996).
107 The Source, August, 2003, no. 167, 150.
and Intertec (maker of the Tec-9 handgun). Not only gun makers, but also electronics and stereo manufacturers, such as Alpine or Pioneer, and beverage makers, ranging from both low- and high-end soda pops to alcoholic beverages, found methods of endorsement in hip hop songs and magazines. Sports teams and players also found ways to get involved in a mutually reciprocal and beneficial commercial relationship, finding athletes to endorse products now linked to both cultures. Both Tiger Woods and Grant Hill, despite enormous deals and endorsements of huge companies like Nike and Sprite, battled a bit with the negative perceptions conveyed when they revealed either dabbling in, or outright liking hip hop music. Nonetheless, while sports found it rather easy to attach brands like Nike to the hip hop, sports, and fashion cultures, the beverage industry remains one of the more interesting and less obvious industries to branch into a hip hop audience, both during and after the mid to late 1990s.

Both non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverage corporations cashed in on hip hop’s newfound marketability, and its subsidiary, untapped markets. Even lower-end soda pop brands found their company names referenced. In Faygo’s case, they found endorsement from the Detroit-based Insane Clown Posse and its affiliate artists, such as Twisted. Sprite actually used its money to secure contractual endorsements from specific sports players and hip hop artists who personified hip hop culture in their respective fields, such as Grant Hill or KRS-One. Even alcoholic beverages, whether on the lower- or higher-ends of reputation, appeared almost everywhere in hip hop artist’s songs. After 1995, they appeared far more frequently than ever before. Notorious B.I.G. referenced almost everything from Ripple (a 40-ounce malt liquor drink) to Cristal (a very

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110 For one example, see The Source, September 1996, no. 84, 29; and The Source, March 1997, no. 90, 108-112.
111 There are numerous potential songs to be used for evidence. For one, see “Hokus Pokus” on Insane Clown Posse, The Great Milenko (New York: Island, 1997). Faygo is referenced quite often by ICP on nearly all music releases.
high-end liqueur).\textsuperscript{113} Tupac and many, many others, ranging from Lauryn Hill of the Fugees and NWA to Foxy Brown and Master P’s No Limit artists, referenced expensive liquors and liqueurs.\textsuperscript{114} Some artists actually made entire songs about drinking liquor and what brands they endorsed.\textsuperscript{115} At one point, some liquor companies actually hired hip hop artists to endorse their products, such as when St. Ides (malt liquor) secured endorsement deals with Method Man (Wu-Tang Clan) and Ice Cube (NWA).\textsuperscript{116}

As hip hop music and culture went increasingly toward the mainstream and underwent rampant commercialization, corporations took pains to consciously promote the culture in conjunction with their own business interests. As a direct result, hip hop’s participants struggled with the changes in hip hop’s identity, as well as their own identities, as it shifted from a marginalized subculture to a commoditized, mainstream culture. Corporations in a number of powerful, mainstream and influential industries, ranging from music and film to media, beverages, sports, and fashion, prodigiously and (sometimes) judiciously\textsuperscript{117} invested money in this newly available and lucrative hip hop market. As a result, these corporations developed a vested interest in what they sold to those consumers, while paying close attention to the trends selling within this market and culture.

Aware of these changes in hip hop, both its producers and consumers responded by sharing both conflicted feelings and vastly different opinions about hip hop’s move to the

\textsuperscript{113} For example, see the songs “The Long Kiss Goodnight” (Disc Two) and “Fuck You Tonight” (Disc 1) on Notorious B.I.G., Life After Death (New York: Bad Boy Records/Universal Records, 1997).
\textsuperscript{114} Two of Tupac’s most famous and often referenced lines are: “Years ago, a friend of mine/told me Alize and Cristal blows your mind,” and “I’m drinking Hennessy/I’m trying to make it last/I drank a fifth [750 ml bottle] for that ass when you passed [away].” These lyrics are found respectively in the songs “I’ve Got My Mind Made Up” and “Life Goes On” on 2Pac, All Eyez on Me [Disc 1] (CA: Death Row Records, 1996).
\textsuperscript{115} The most famous example is Mobb Deep, “Drink Away the Pain (Situations),” The Infamous (New York: RCA/BMG/Loud Records LLC, 1995).
\textsuperscript{116} VIBE, September 1996, vol. 4, no. 8, 58.
\textsuperscript{117} The Source, January 1997, no. 88, 98-100. For a more complete understanding of what is meant by the use of this term “judicious” relative to corporations exploiting or desiring to use hip hop for profit, please see Tricia Rose, The Hip Hop Wars: What we Talk About When we Talk About Hip Hop – And Why it Matters (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008), 138-147.
forefront of mainstream national culture and how these changes affected both hip hop’s identity and their own. Some people felt it a positive development for hip hop’s widespread acceptance in the national culture, for it validated hip hop’s legitimacy and value. Meanwhile, others felt this threatened its original values because of the distortions and corruptions of its artistic integrity and aesthetic purpose.

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119 Such people pointed to and reflected sentiments expressed from the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as when Ice Cube said: “Fuck Top 40/And fuck Top 30 and Top 20 and Top 10/Until you put more hip hop in.” The lyric indicates, among other things, how much Ice Cube would like to see hip hop music gain status and recognition in the mainstream music industry, and expresses his frustration at not being accepted in the mainstream via radio play. This is found on Ice Cube, “Turn Off the Radio,” AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted (Hollywood, CA: Priority Records, Inc., 1990, 2003). Reissue.
CHAPTER V

STRUGGLING TO PRESERVE HIP HOP’S IDENTITY AND ‘REALNESS’ AS IT SHIFTS FROM MARGINALIZED TO COMMODITIZED

“Fundamentally, these discussions pivot on the notion of hip-hop’s essential character—its authentic expression. Authenticity, however defined or imagined, has always been central to the culture.” – Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar

The spread and prominence of hip hop both nationally and internationally, along with the emerging regional styles and identities therein, precipitated contestation, dialog, and debate, over what the changes in its commercialization and shift toward the mainstream meant for hip hop culture. Were the changes inevitable and unavoidable as hip hop progressed and matured, or was hip hop now being controlled by actors and agencies whose primary concern had little if anything to do with the original values espoused by hip hop culture? Was hip hop still ‘keeping it real,’ or was it now ‘fake’ because of how its values had shifted and its principles been compromised? As hip hop scholar Jeffrey Ogbar put it: “Some view this [rampant commercialization of hip hop] as a portentous sign of hip-hop’s decline and corruption. Others welcome it as an example of young black talent and business expertise and even as a salve for America’s old wounds of racism.” Nevertheless, while some expressed excitement and others indignation at hip hop’s excessive mainstream commercialization, these questions burned in the

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minds of artists, fans, magazine contributors, and countless others who felt they possessed a stake in how hip hop progressed.\textsuperscript{125}

As scholar Jeffrey Ogbar described: “At its most fundamental level, ‘realness’ in hip-hop implies an intimate familiarity with the urban, working-class landscapes that gave rise to hip-hop in the 1970s…Conversely, middle-class status, suburban living, and whiteness have been further removed from hip-hop authenticity physically, spatially, and culturally.”\textsuperscript{126} In other words, could hip hop retain its ‘realness’ in spite of accepting and perhaps overlooking the inclusion of white, middle-class suburbanites, who helped push hip hop into the mainstream, or did this signify selling out its values, traditions, and cultures in order to find acceptance from this dominant segment of society?\textsuperscript{127}

Artists and fans from the very beginnings of hip hop always scrutinized the abilities of rappers and producers,\textsuperscript{128} praising those of outstanding talents (using slang like “ill,” “dope,” or “real”), and denouncing those of subpar or inferior aptitude (using slang like “lame,” “wack,” or “fake”). Whereas a dichotomy between good and bad artistic ability previously defined the focus of concern between hip hop fans and artists, the considerations in the mid-90s grew beyond simple concerns of whether an artist was “wack” or “ill,” into what the artist and his or her music represented, not only within the culture, but in mainstream society.

Magazines like \textit{The Source} and \textit{VIBE} also contributed to the discussion, perhaps more abundantly and influentially than almost anyone apart from the artists themselves. They not only

\textsuperscript{125} For some examples, please see: \textit{The Source}, December 1996, no. 87, 18-25; \textit{The Source}, January 1997, no. 88, 98-100; and \textit{The Source}, March 1997, no. 90, 20-25.


\textsuperscript{127} Ed. Adam Bradley, and Andrew DuBois. \textit{The Anthology of Rap} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 329. He writes: “Rap’s expanding audience carried with it much of the baggage that always accompanies cross-racial artistic exchange in America—in this case anxieties about the ‘corruption of youth’ on one side, fears of banalization [sic] and cooptation on the other.”

opined views similar to what many of their readers believed, but also, more importantly, readers debated or hotly contested infractions they felt the magazines committed against both the culture and its artists. While the magazines held ultimate control over whether their disagreeing and sometimes angry readers’ letters actually made it into the letters section of their magazines, there is plenty of evidence to suggest their sensitivity to reader’s comments and responses to their magazine’s content.129

Unsurprisingly, debate abounds throughout these magazines as to hip hop’s integrity, artistically as well as its role socially. In a March 1996 issue, one editorial in VIBE by Greg Tate, questioned, “Is Hip Hop Dead?” Reflecting one of the more popular viewpoints during this time, Tate, noticeably upset at how hip hop changed from its earlier days, argued hip hop no longer existed. Tate, however, consciously or unconsciously refused to define what hip hop was or meant.130

Others at the same time refused to either believe or entertain such a viewpoint, dismissing it as ridiculous and absurd, and considered the 1995-98 period a phase of excellence in the hip hop world. After Greg Tate’s “Is Hip Hop Dead?” piece, letters flooded the VIBE office, criticizing both Tate’s inability to understand the times and his biased nostalgic feelings of the ‘good old days’ of hip hop, while defending the hip hop artists and music materializing during this time. Two issues after Tate’s editorial, at least two letters criticizing Tate’s piece and

129 For one example, after printing a story on Jackie Chan, then an up and coming presence in the states, a reader vehemently responded their indignation that Jackie Chan got so much attention, when the great legend of martial arts superstardom, Bruce Lee, should be remembered, VIBE responded by putting Bruce Lee in its “Props” section, which was designed to give “proper respect” to a person VIBE felt a debt of gratitude toward for their positive influence on urban and minority culture. This instance appears first with Jackie Chan in VIBE, March 1996, vol. 4, no.2 , 82; next with the disgruntled and criticizing reader in VIBE, May 1996, vol. 4, no. 4, 19-24; and later with Bruce Lee in VIBE, June/July 1996, vol 4, no. 5, 152. In another instance, due to the flood of letters complaining about their rating system and accusing The Source of having ulterior motives and interests compromising or biasing their ratings, The Source felt it necessary to dedicate an entire editorial and section to inform the readers of what is involved in this process of ratings, and to (hopefully) convince its readers of its impartiality. This instance appears in The Source, March 1997, no. 90, 16-22. Both of these suggest the sensitivity these magazines placed on the responses of their readers.

defending the hip hop of the day appeared in the mail section of the magazine, showcasing the division between viewpoints within the hip hop community.\textsuperscript{131} The fact so many felt the need to refute Tate’s piece demonstrates the divergence and diversity of opinions the fans felt in regard to the hip hop music of the day.

The magazines themselves often came under attack from its readership for errors in judgment, overt biases, irresponsible reporting, and even its own hypocrisies, which many felt antithetical to the realness of hip hop. At one point, \textit{VIBE} decided to run an article decrying the use of drugs. Many media outlets, concerned parents, and discriminatory or oppositional people toward hip hop, contended hip hop glorified the use of and promoted a lifestyle and behavior providing a bad influence on the youth within American society.\textsuperscript{132} \textit{VIBE} usually tried to represent both sides of the responses in its mail section, but interestingly they only included letters that positively received and applauded \textit{VIBE}’s anti-drug use article and never included any oppositional letters to its anti-drug article.

Nevertheless, the letter of David White from Brooklyn, New York, found its way into the mail section, where he openly criticized \textit{VIBE}’s hypocrisy. David White of Brooklyn, started his critique by applauding \textit{VIBE}’s attempt at responsibility by facing the drug issue, yet he went on to criticize \textit{VIBE}’s integrity, as he pointed out their complicity and disregard for their personal responsibility in promoting drugs and the lifestyles of the stars reflecting it.\textsuperscript{133} In the same anti-drug article, it decried alcohol usage and endorsement, and even one issue later, criticized artists Method Man and Ice Cube for their paid endorsement of St. Ides Malt Liquor.\textsuperscript{134} \textit{VIBE} promoted

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\bibitem{131} \textit{VIBE}, May 1996, vol. 4, no. 4, 19-21.
\bibitem{133} \textit{VIBE}, August 1996, vol. 4, no. 6, 31-34.
\bibitem{134} \textit{VIBE}, September 1996, vol. 4, no. 7, 58.
\end{thebibliography}
a view that use of drugs and alcohol reflected poor choices and behavior. Yet, hypocritically, *VIBE* advertised a plethora of alcohol-related brands throughout each issue, including: Budweiser, Coors, Hennessy, Tanqueray, Dewar’s, Bacardi, Remy Martin, Jim Beam, E&J, and others.\(^135\) The magazines themselves often appeared to also demonstrate this contradiction: denouncing drug and alcohol use in one article, and then advertising or promoting alcohol and drug use in ads and interviews with artists.

Both the integrity of the magazines’ and the hip hop artists found themselves questioned by the readers and fans in greater quantities. The artists, though they might previously have personified “real” or authentic hip hop, now seemed to represent something else divorced from hip hop: selling out.\(^136\) One of the best examples illustrating this resentment among the fans came in the form of KRS-One, a hip hop icon from its earlier days, who still managed to remain relevant. Initially, KRS-One formed Boogie Down Productions in the mid 1980s, which released two pivotal albums for hip hop: *Criminal Minded* (1987) and *By All Means Necessary* (1988). KRS-One’s beef with MC Shan of Marley Marl’s Juice Crew All-Stars still stood among the most important rivalries in hip hop history.\(^137\)

KRS-One also possessed enormous street credibility, and for that reason, he attracted the attention of not only hip hop fans, but mainstream companies as well. He helped in the creation of both “socially conscious” and “gangsta rap” as identifiable trends with those albums.\(^138\) He lived at a shelter when homeless, immediately prior to his record deal; and his own DJ, Scott La

\(^{135}\) These advertisements can be found throughout numerous issues. For example, Bacardi, Remy Martin, and Dewar’s can be found in *VIBE*, October 1996, vol. 4, no. 8, 45, 54, 72-73. 


Rock, was murdered during the time in between the two albums.\textsuperscript{139} He also started the “Stop the Violence” movement in response to his own experiences with gang violence and Scott La Rock’s death. Later during the height of the East vs. West bicoastal ‘war,’ KRS-One refused to choose a side and instead tried squashing the rivalries, standing firmly against any kind of ‘war’ between East and West.\textsuperscript{140} Furthermore, with his lyrical skills, KRS-One could demolish other MCs with relative ease. In one particularly noteworthy incident, while at a PM Dawn concert, utterly convinced of PM Dawn’s “wackness,” he proceeded to physically and literally throw them off stage.\textsuperscript{141} He then finished their concert set by improvising with his own material. In other words, KRS-One possessed plenty of “juice” or respect in the hip hop community and warranted enough reason for companies such as Sprite, Nike, Echo, and the NBA to seek endorsement deals with him during this time.\textsuperscript{142}

KRS-One, around 1996-97, also did in-depth interviews with \textit{VIBE} and \textit{The Source} (appearing on the covers of both magazines), and in spite of the differences in their respective articles, both magazines raised questions about whether KRS-One sold out, or at the very least, bankrupted his ideological positioning by embracing endorsement deals.\textsuperscript{143} The once invincible stature of KRS-One, one of hip hop’s greatest legends, seemed somehow vulnerable. Several people’s responses to the \textit{VIBE} article felt it reflected KRS-One’s ego and expressed negative

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} As a result of this stance of anti-East vs. West Coast, KRS-One recorded a track with Nas, B-Real (of Cypress Hill), and Dr. Dre, called “East Coast, West Coast, Killers,” and designed to help squash the beef between the East and West Coast artists. It is the second track found on Dr. Dre, \textit{Dr. Dre Presents: The Aftermath} (CA: Aftermath/Interscope Records, 1996).
\textsuperscript{141} This legendary event can be found on the works of several contemporary artists who wrote references to the incident in their lyrics. For example, Big L says: “I must warn, I got it going on, word is bond/Ducks be getting thrown off platforms like PM Dawn” on Big L, “All Black,” \textit{Lifestylez ov da Poor & Dangerous} (New York: Columbia Records, 1995). Reference to this event is also found in \textit{The Source}, August 2003, no. 167, 110.
\textsuperscript{142} \textit{The Source}, January 1997, no.88, 98.
\textsuperscript{143} This is alluded to in several places. One prime example is found in \textit{VIBE}, April 1996, vol. 4, no. 3, 29.
sentiments toward KRS-One and what he now represented.\textsuperscript{144} Already, he appeared in a series of television commercials and magazine advertisements endorsing various brands, and fans who wrote into the magazines disrespected his willingness to sellout and his justifications for it. He justified his decision to accept such endorsement deals because the ‘time had come for KRS-One to embrace mainstream commercialization.’\textsuperscript{145} It seemed more than mere coincidence which prompted the magazine editors to place a Nike ad featuring KRS-One immediately following the mail section where these letters decried KRS-One’s selling out.\textsuperscript{146} Even when KRS-One appeared in \textit{The Source}, the writer of the article speculated whether or not today’s hip hop generation really still felt or identified with KRS-One.\textsuperscript{147} Other problems with KRS-One’s supposedly “real” image surfaced with the appearance of NBA and Sprite ads.\textsuperscript{148}

It seemed like in almost one fell swoop, three top commercial industries, beverages, fashion, and sports, corrupted (sold out) one of hip hop’s best-known figures personifying realness. Many could not help but feel betrayed by the corruption of the person many people identified or regarded as the personification of real in hip hop, alternately laughing or mocking at how in his NBA and Nike ads on TV, KRS-One called basketball “revolutionary.”\textsuperscript{149} Sprite did its absolute best to reconstruct history in the hopes of identifying itself with the consumer, as ‘down with hip hop’ and its cultural history and traditions. For Sprite’s commercial, it reenacted the historic battle between KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions, who represented the South Bronx, and MC Shan of the Juice Crew representing Queens, by placing both in a boxing ring

\textsuperscript{144} \textit{VIBE}, February 1996, vol. 4, no. 1, 23-25.
\textsuperscript{146} \textit{VIBE}, February 1996, vol. 4, no. 1, 26.
\textsuperscript{147} \textit{The Source}, March 1997, no. 90, 104; \textit{The Source}, January 1997, no. 88, 98-100; and \textit{VIBE}, April 1996, vol. 4, no. 3, 29, 92.
with mics and backed by their respective DJs, Red Alert and Mr. Magic, with DJ Kid Capri as referee. Despite its attention and respect for hip hop’s history and culture, it received a mixture of support and condemnation among fans, especially after KRS-One’s commercial for NBA and Nike. Sprite also gained an endorsement deal with NBA star Grant Hill, known for liking hip hop music, but caught flak from critics for his identification and endorsement of hip hop. His critics reiterated the same criticisms of hip hop: its promotion of misogyny, violence, disrespect for laws, and destructive influences for minors and society at large. Nevertheless, through the eyes of American mainstream corporate businesses, it seemed natural to connect KRS-One with basketball as well, and by proxy sports fashion, and, as a result, both the NBA and Nike secured endorsement deals with KRS-One.

There also loomed the issue of what other old-school legends felt about the arrangement between the commercialization of hip hop and its integrity. MC Lyte maintained hip hop remained real and defended it against allegations of it no longer retaining its hardcore elements, despite going commercial and some people selling out, which reflected the views of a great many artists and fans.

However, others such as Chuck D of Public Enemy, also retained their reputation for outspokenness and realness, as one of the most potent critics on how commercialization compromised hip hop’s integrity. For example, when the NBA’s Dream Team II took the cover of VIBE’s August 1996 issue, Chuck D wrote a letter appearing in the mail section, criticizing VIBE for selling out to the NBA: “No offense to the NBA…but damn, with all the deserving hip hop and black music artists out there, why must a music magazine give a cover to athletes who already have their own magazines? Culture my ass! Sport is sport, and that industry doesn’t care

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152 See VIBE, November 1996, vol. 4, no. 9, 96; or The Source, October 1996, no. 85, 79-82.
what [the hip hop generation] think[s].”153 In another instance, he expressed his misgivings about how the commodification of hip hop obstructed its values and purpose, and found the music industry: “detrimental to the growth and development of hip hop culture.”154

While the hip hop nation decried corporate America’s cooptation of hip hop and distortion of its principles, people outside the hip hop nation decried hip hop’s negative influences.155 Especially during the 1990s, a trend in psychology studies emphasized these concerns, such as the debilitating and negative affects occurring in minors as a result of exposure to different kinds of music, especially hip hop and heavy metal. Some studies attempted to show how exposure to hip hop music negatively affected the propensity for misogyny and sexual violence against women.156 Other studies sought to link teenagers and delinquents with preferences for rap music and heavy metal and linked such preferences with behavioral problems. Such studies were especially interested on these affects demonstrated in social environments like public schools.157 Among the most potent of criticisms against the music and culture of hip hop regarded the idea and perception it influenced juvenile crime, or promoted and taught violence, even sexual violence.158

This contention–rap music causes violence–found itself refuted again and again by artists prior to, during, and even after this period. Willie D of the Geto Boys said in 1992: “Rap Music, they're trying to ban it/Cause blacks are getting paid and they can't stand it/They say we're too

violent for instance/But why in the hell is Rock still in existence?/I’ma tell you why it still remains./Like a coat it'll hang/Cause it’s a white thing/This attack on the black sound/Is just one more plot to keep the brother man down.”

Willie D, like many other artists, felt people who criticized rap used a double standard when passing judgment and provided a way for whites to express veiled racism. Additionally, Big Pun mentioned in 1998: “Parental discretion, advised keep out the eyes of the youth, it’s too explicit/Bullshit, I challenge the statistics/Violence existed before our music was even suggested…so blame it all on the gangsta rapper.”

Among the numerous opponents appearing against rap music and hip hop culture during this time was C. Delores Tucker. “[T]hat self-proclaimed sexually frustrated church lady,” Tucker, who also happened to be African-American, created visible problems for rap music’s rapid expansion into the mainstream. She scored her greatest victory by using her governmental connections to apply pressure to the music industry and targeted specific labels. The one foremost on her list, Death Row Records, gained her attention by virtue of its status as the most successful and profitable rap music label for the time. After months of organizing support, rallying her allies, railing against the vices and problems of hip hop, she finally succeeded. She applied enough pressure to cause Time Warner, one of the largest and most powerful businesses involved in the music industry, to drop its subsidiary, Interscope Records, and as a result Death Row Records as well. The fact that MCA rushed in and immediately signed Interscope and Death Row to its own label meant little to hip hop fans and artists. They instead felt the damage represented a serious problem and resistance to hip hop. It also meant far more rested at

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163 This is mentioned in several places due to its significance in the hip hop world. For example, see VIBE, May 1996, vol. 4, no. 4, 30; or also The Source, July 1996, no. 82, 76.
stake than just a record company dropping its subsidiary simply because of controversy and pressure. Tucker succeeded at getting a multimillion dollar company like Time Warner to drop the most commercially successful record label for rap music of the era.\textsuperscript{165}

C. Delores Tucker’s destructive influence reached such a point of contention within the hip hop nation where it prompted numerous hip hop artists to express their sentiments about her and what she represented. The majority of song references deal with her inability to understand or relate to the culture and its music, and often degrade her character in response to her own attacks on the character of the hip hop culture and its artists. In one example, KRS-One dedicated an entire verse to her, commenting:

You can’t dis hip-hop, so don’t you even go there/C. Delores Tucker, you wanna quote the scripture/Everytime you hear “nigga,” listen up sista/...I met up with this girl named Delores, a prankster/I said I MC, she said, “You’re a gangster”...Recognize moms I’m one of your sons, I’m hip-hop...Representin MC’s across America/She said, “You’re the one who be causing all that mass hysteria”...But you blinded by cultural ignorance and steady judging/But judge not, lest ye may be judged/For the judgment ye judge ye shall surely be judged, you gets no love.\textsuperscript{166}

KRS-One refutes Tucker’s attacks on the basis of merit, rather than degrading her character.

Many other artists responded to Tucker’s accusations by preferring to degrade her character. Ras Kass said: “You don’t even understand, I ain’t scared of you motherfuckers/Senator Bob Dole and C. Delores Tucker.”\textsuperscript{167} Others got far more graphic and offensive in their responses, such as when WC said: “But ain’t no stopping this westside clique/So, tell that bitch Delores Tucker to suck a nigga’s dick/Cause I’m punking more niggas than Deebo/Illegal sipping Seagrams, straight smoking on a Primo.”\textsuperscript{168} WC explains how he bullies people like Deebo did in the movie \textit{Friday} (1995). He also reiterates and shares the


notion of many contemporary artists, who declare their complete disregard for her views and demonstrates little inclination to care what she thinks of him, emphasizing the point by continuing to drink liquor and smoking on a blunt laced with cocaine. Lastly, WC addresses her as a “bitch” and tells her to “suck a dick,” basically meaning ‘go fuck off’ in as vulgar and misogynistic a way as possible to compound his insult. Other hip hop artists got involved by offering their opinions on the issues Tucker raised without specifically mentioning her, but instead confronting her criticisms, especially whether or not hip hop caused violence.169

The most significant confrontation against C. Delores Tucker in musical form came from Tupac Shakur, a Death Row artist himself, who referenced her numerous times in his music. Tupac’s criticisms of Tucker, in part because of his status as arguably the most commercially successful hip hop artist of the time, seemed to hold the most weight out of all the artists who felt the need to criticize her. In one hit song, Tupac said:

C. Delores Tucker, you’s a motherfucker/Instead of trying to help a nigga you destroy your brother/Worse than the others – Bill Clinton, Mr. Bob Dole/You're too old to understand the way the game’s told/…They wanna censor me; they’d rather see me in a cell/Living in hell – only a few of us’ll live to tell/Now everybody talking ‘bout us I could give a fuck/I'd be the first one to bomb and cuss.170

Here Tupac attacks her by saying instead of helping blacks she’s betraying them by seeking to divide and destroy them, and questioning her loyalty to her race. He also makes the point how Tucker, and other high profile critics of hip hop, simply do not understand the youth and their culture, and because they cannot change who he is, he could not care less about what they have to say about it. He even dedicates a song, “Wonder Why They Call U Bitch,” to Tucker. Tupac used this song both as a means to help explain to her and other critics the reason why in songs he

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refers to certain kinds of women as “bitches,” and as a tactic to compound the insult. At another point he stated: “When Bob Dole and C. Delores Tucker wanna know where my soldiers at, GO VOTE!” This demonstrated Tupac wished to confront Tucker and presidential candidate Dole not only musically, but politically as well. In yet another song, after specifically naming C. Delores Tucker and Bob Dole, and defending himself from a legal standpoint by pointing out he is protected by the Constitution’s provision for freedom of speech, he mocked them in jest: “Goddamn! Rap music I hate that. It’s just so violent and it destroys everyone, it makes the kids crazy. The kids kill people. There cop hater, here going against society, I don’t understand the music. It’s too loud, it’s too rowdy, it’s too violent. Let’s ban all rap music. Ban Tupac, ban [Tupac’s group] the Outlaw Immortalz, ban ’em.”

Not only the hip hop artists, but also *VIBE* and *The Source* participated in the discussion between Tucker and the hip hop nation. They ultimately discredited Tucker and her allies while successfully defending both the hip hop nation and themselves. *VIBE* featured an article where they interviewed Tucker, which, as evidenced by letters, demonstrated to hip hop fans how misinformed and ignorant about the music and culture Tucker actually was. *VIBE* used its editorial section to launch incendiary salvos directed at C. Delores Tucker, her tactics, and integrity. Furthermore, several months later, *The Source* also dedicated an entire editorial as “An Open Letter to C. Delores,” a scathing criticism of herself and her position against hip

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172 2pac, “Military Minds,” *Better Dayz* [Disc 2] (CA: Amaru Entertainment, 2002). This song originally appeared on an album called *One Nation*.
173 2pac, “Don’t Stop,” *Pac’s Life* (CA: Amaru Entertainment, 2006). This track does appear on a posthumously released album, but the point is that the song was recorded in 1996, and reflected his sentiments.
Both magazines unleashed an arsenal of attacks on her character on the basis of several of her hypocritical and scandalous dealings: owning slum housing in Philadelphia with histories of poor management made her a slum lord; she dishonestly falsified her educational credentials; and it even came out she committed a serious embezzlement scandal, amounting to tens of thousands of dollars, while employed as a public worker for the state of Pennsylvania.177

Additionally, Scarface’s “Hand of the Dead Body,” featuring Ice Cube, offers the best supposition of the critics’ positions against hip hop during this time, among the many available for selection. He begins with a skit demonstrating the position of people like C. Delores Tucker against hip hop:

In world news today, officials decree that rapper Brad Jordan alias Scarface must be stopped. After being monitored by secret service agents for two years, evidence leads Tobacco and Fire Arms officials to believe that his literally dope lyrics promote drug usage and distribution, degrade women, influence gambling, promote and teach violence, and more importantly, its influencing our minors and destroying our communities. Officials say he’s a lord of underground rap, and he and his music must be stopped.178 This skit excellently encapsulates many of the main attacks against rap music and its artists, giving a fairly accurate portrayal. Of course mainstream hip hop artists frequently degraded women during this period, and Scarface obfuscates sexism by pointing to racism. Even so, Scarface then proceeds to decimate such contentions about hip hop causing violence. He also pointed out double standards and confused or misinformed logic, and highlighted the history of racism and oppression against black Americans throughout American history, using lines like: “America’s always been known for blaming us niggas for they fuck ups.”179

Although hip hop once again successfully defended itself against the onslaught of critical persons, organizations, and political agendas, it found it much harder to deal with whether rap

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176 The Source, February 1997, no. 89, 8.
177 The Source, June 1996, no. 81, 17-18.
music’s corruption via commercialization fundamentally changed hip hop from its initial values to a point where it threatened its advancement, acceptance, and legitimacy within the hip hop community. Many artists expressed these concerns in a number of songs, and the concerns over whether hip hop ‘sold out’ continued to linger in the minds of both fans and artists. Most recognized such scrutinizing only worked effectively on a case-by-case basis and did not apply to the whole of the hip hop nation. Yet people could identify trends within the artistic community reflecting such changes, and many voiced strong opinions on the matter. For example, at one point, an editorial in The Source expressed negative opinions over the whole Mafioso trend popularized by Raekwon’s Only Built 4 Cuban Linx… (1995), stating it indicated not only hip hop artists “trying to be white,” but also signaled a decline in integrity and uniqueness.180

Jeru the Damaja’s “One Day,” looked at how this rampant commercialization affected hip hop. Jeru’s image conveyed to the hip hop world his realness and legitimacy.181 His first album, The Sun Rises in the East (1994), established him as one of the elite revivalists of the East Coast’s lyrical supremacy,182 and his anti-commercialized stance in addition to his seemingly incorruptible values as a hip hop purest, enabled him to garner praise and attention for his own feelings regarding the direction rap music headed. His fans awaited his second album, Wrath of the Math (1996), with serious anticipation, and he did not disappoint. Jeru confronted the modern-day issues hip hop found itself up against. He even gained a prestigious “Hip Hop Quotable” for his lyrics in The Source,183 while gaining decent reviews from both magazines.

His track “One Day” drew the most attention from magazines and fans because of how he tackled the issues concerning the state of hip hop for the present time. Like Common’s “I Used
to Love H.E.R.” Jeru used an extended metaphor about hip hop to describe hip hop and its present move to the forefront of mainstream American society. Unlike Common, who fixated on the corruption of his love for hip hop through gangsta rap, materialism, and commercialization, and how he hoped to bring hip hop back to (the woman he fell in love with or) what it used to embody; Jeru instead paid particular attention to more precise attributes hip hop embraced. More importantly, Jeru specifically named those he felt responsible for such changes: Puff Daddy and Suge Knight, the respective independent owners of the two most commercially successful record labels of the day, Bad Boy and Death Row. At the beginning of the song, Jeru awakened early in the morning by a vehicle screeching off. Upon investigation he finds a note saying: “We have hip hop hostage with guns to his throat/Do the right thing and we might let him go/But if you call the police, that’s all she wrote/You know what the motive is, it’s all about dough/And in case ya think we bullshittin’ here’s the photo.”

This statement related the feelings that ‘gangsta rap’ highjacked or held hip hop hostage and sold hip hop out for money or ransom, especially because the motive “is all about dough,” and symbolizing commercialism.

Jeru continued on, noticing “Foxy Brown sipping Cristal in the background/with fake alligator boots on/and smack dab in the middle was hip hop with a Versace suit on,” which meant artists who put fashion with high class luxury before the music (representing the shifting of style replacing substance) endangered hip hop. Additionally, the fake alligator boots Foxy wears symbolized the fakeness of hip hop’s rampant commercialization. He then tells how he contacted DJ Premier, his producer, so they could retrieve, or get hip hop back, by creating more real hip hop, truer to its initial values.

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184 This song appears on Common, Resurrection (New York: Relativity, 1994). The song personifies hip hop as a woman who Common used to love, but now that she’s changed (become commercialized) he finds it difficult to remain in love with her. He longs for her to return to the woman (hip hop) he used to love.
186 Ibid.
Next Jeru mentions: “If I recall correctly I last saw hip hop down at Bad Boy/We'll see if Puff knows what’s up/Cause he’s the one getting him drunk and fucking his mind up.” He unambiguously places blame on Puff Daddy, manager to Biggie and the owner of Bad Boy Records, the second most powerful and commercially successful independent label in hip hop, for “fucking” hip hop’s “mind up” by getting it drunk on luxury, expensive alcohol, commercialism, and other undesirable effects of mainstream commoditization. Although it is very important to notice Jeru implicates Puff Daddy, he does not make any specific mention of Biggie, which meant Jeru, like many others in the hip hop nation, still felt despite Biggie’s success he still maintained his realness and credibility as an artist. Jeru goes to Bad Boy’s headquarters and beats down one of the record label staff members, specifically naming one of Puff Daddy’s associates, symbolizing Jeru’s realness and asserting authority as artists over the industry workers, and forces him to divulge what happened to hip hop.

The record industry staff member confesses to Jeru: “Suge [Knight from Death Row] came and took him from Puff last night/He said he’d give him up if a real nigga came to retrieve him/So we went to L.A. later that evening.” This symbolized how the independent labels in hip hop music wrestled control from the normal record industry companies, but also acknowledged Death Row, thanks to help from Tupac’s quintuple platinum All Eyez on Me, as taking the crown away from Bad Boy and Biggie as the premier hip hop label, and placing it firmly in Death Row’s hands. It also symbolized how hip hop moved from New York to Los Angeles, or the East Coast to the West Coast, as to who set the national hip hop trends. The fact

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188 Ibid.
189 All Eyez on Me (1996) set all kinds of trends, such as gaining the distinction as first ever double disc album in hip hop. Later this double album trend found others copying the trend, such as the East Coast powerhouses Wu-Tang Clan for its Forever (1997) double disc album, as well as his chief rival, the Notorious B.I.G., who released his own double disc album Life After Death (1997).
Suge Knight refused to return hip hop safely unless a “real nigga” came to retrieve him, speaks to Suge Knight’s characterization as a gangsta record executive. Suge only gives a “real” person, either in their dedication to either hip hop’s values, or else to street and gang life values, the ability to negotiate a safe return for hip hop. Again, Jeru, despite mentioning Suge Knight by name, refrains from implicating or criticizing Tupac, presumably because, as with Biggie, many in the hip hop nation felt despite his massive commercial success, Tupac maintained his realness and credibility as an artist. Finally, Jeru accomplishes his task: “When we got there, everything was aight/And we brought hip hop back home that night.” Jeru as a “real” artist regained control over hip hop from Suge Knight, the personification of gangsta rap music’s power. The story addressed an important conflict existing within hip hop, but very few actually expressed it in terms as concrete and specific as Jeru the Damaja did.

People’s perceptions of hip hop’s identity fundamentally changed as a result of the struggles caused by its shifting from a marginalized subculture to the forefront of mainstream national culture. A few years later, Nas expressed the feelings of many in his comments on a song years later, in the following way: “We used to be a ghetto secret/can’t make my mind up, if I want that or the whole world to peep [see] it.” Nas finds it difficult to decide whether he preferred hip hop to remain in the fringes of society, so it remained true to its origins and traditional values, or if he preferred hip hop to go so mainstream it emerged as a globally recognized culture, but knowing full-well what compromises might result from such a shift. This clarifies the conflicting feelings the hip hop participants and audiences felt sandwiched between during the 1995-1998 era.

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190 As previously mentioned, fellow artists such as Scarface rapped lines reflecting this: “I’m like ‘Pac, I make a mil[lion dollars] but I still live the thug life.” This line is from Scarface, “The White Sheet,” The Diary (Houston, TX: Rap-A-Lot Records, 1994).
Over the ensuing years, the hip hop nation continued to battle with whether it compromised its values by going so mainstream and commercialized. Rappers and producers foresaw and speculated on these problems long before it reached the first point of crisis during the 1995-1998 era, but much like other genres before it, this problem waxed and waned without a clear resolve or solution. A host of MCs who expressed doubts with the commercialization of the hip hop industry released songs about the issue, and their rhymes gained perhaps more truth as hip hop went more and more mainstream in its prominence. In one instance, MC Lyte confronted this issue by making an entire song about it. Guru for example rapped in 1990: “It’s just some hype that the company’s selling ya/cause they’ll take a dud talking crud and they’ll push ‘em/but in the next year someone new will just squish ‘em/cause when you sellout to appeal to the masses/you have to go back and enroll in some classes.” This quote relates to how some artists in hip hop get on because of marketing and not skill, but due to this will undoubtedly fall off. Guru recommended when someone sells out, they should go back and study the traditions and craft of hip hop in order to remain successful and true to the art. As if to encapsulate the sentiment of music fans everywhere, during a regular feature in *VIBE* with Bobbito Garcia and a famous celebrity called “Sound Check,” Garcia explained to his guest Tony Bennett, “In hip hop, the more spiritually and emotionally inspired a record is, the less commercially viable it becomes.” Tony Bennett responded to Garcia’s statement by lamenting, “It’s really an injustice. In my era…the excellency of the artist was first and foremost…Now, whatever is marketed becomes popular.” This summarized the opinions of many hip hop fans who felt previously in hip hop the “excellency of the artist” came first, but now “whatever is marketed becomes

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popular,” meaning hip hop’s quality underwent a decline via mainstream commercialization. In other words, as with Bennett’s feelings, it represented “an injustice.”

However, one of the best acknowledgments of this conflict on record between hip hop’s traditional roots and the mainstream came from a producer rather than an MC, when in 1998 DJ Premier said:

To whom it may concern, this goes out to anybody who’s doing the bullshit straight up…y’all are supposed to be hip hoppers and all that, and letting the industry control the rules of the hip hop world that we made? Y’all need to knock that shit off. That’s some greedy ass fake bullshit. Knock that shit off for real…And when that shit come and slap you in the face…that greed, I’ma be right there laughing at y’all…Stop doing that, y’all are violating, straight up and down. Word up man, I’m sick of this shit, y’all motherfuckers really don’t know what this hip hop’s all about. So while you keep on faking the funk, we’re gonna keep walking through the darkness carrying our torches.196

Premier makes a serious point to acknowledge the distortions given to hip hop as a product of its commercialization and the negative ramifications resulting from it. Premier used several words, such as “greedy ass,” “fake,” “bullshit,” “violating,” and “faking the funk,” to convey how “letting the industry control the rules of the hip hop world” real hip hop artists “made” damages the integrity, principles, rules, and values of hip hop’s origins and traditions. He urged these perpetrators to stop violating hip hop by making it “fake” and embracing “greed,” or rampant commercialization. Regardless of Premier’s warnings, the battle between tradition and commercialization just went underway during 1995-98, and since then intensified, but even to this day still lacks a clear resolution.

CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

Hip hop music and culture evolved and transformed from its Golden Age in the 1980s, spreading nationally, and then globally, as well as developing its identities and sounds regionally, as it expanded in power and influence. It underwent commercialization on its way toward the mainstream of American culture. Along the way it also struggled with its own identity. In the midst of a personal rivalry turned bicoastal war by media involvement and rampant allure of increased sales through controversy and exposure, Tupac and Biggie eventually paid the price for merging the street life and values of hip hop culture and music with excess commercialization, abundant materialism and heightened exposure with celebrity notoriety, and died violent deaths as a partial result of the mixture of this dangerous combination of lifestyles.

Tupac and Biggie’s careers symbolized for many people hip hop’s movement from the periphery to the center of mainstream culture, and for many in the hip hop nation both managed the feat without jeopardizing what they stood for. Tupac and Biggie stood for many things, most of all the ability to retain their realness and credibility in spite of their commercialized successes. Much like hip hop’s rapid rise toward the mainstream of America during 1995-1998, they also mirrored this incredible rise with their careers reaching toward the highest echelons of success in the music world, and only within a few short years.

Throughout the 1990s, Tupac and Biggie remained true to hip hop’s values and aesthetic sensibilities, maintained and respected tenants of ghetto lifestyles and gang cultures, all while outselling nearly every other artist in music, and, in Tupac’s case, starring in Hollywood movies. They rose from relative obscurity in the beginnings of their careers to eventually providing the dominant embodiment and personification of realness and aesthetic quality in hip hop music, and soon found worldwide recognition. As hip hop developed regional styles and identities, by early 1996 Tupac and Biggie exemplified their respective Coastal affiliations, West and East. As much success as they experienced, they, like hip hop, likewise struggled at times to grapple with the conflict between hip hop principles and their street values, in attempting to balance this with their mainstream successes. In lieu of their inextricable connections with the advancement and shift in hip hop from the periphery to mainstream society, Adam Bradley accordingly wrote: “Any discussion of rap in the 1990s begins with 2pac and Biggie.” Ultimately, their deaths triggered not only the end of the East Coast/West Coast war or rivalry for hip hop supremacy, but also signaled the start of the end for a pivotal era in hip hop’s development.

Many at the time held the East vs. West tensions amplified by national media involvement responsible or contributive to Tupac and Biggie’s deaths. With such commercial prominence and national exposure, their deaths “were fueled by an atmosphere that pitted East Coast against West Coast in a battle about style and substance.” An article appearing in The Source shortly after Biggie’s death attempted to answer the blame for the death of rap’s greatest superstars. “Who’s to blame for this East/West schism? Primary level: Capitalism—it’s that mentality that causes the worship of the dollar at all other expense. Secondary level: Radio stations, video outlets and all other media (mainstream and otherwise)–we, albeit unknowingly at

times–add sticks to this nasty mess with limited playlists, stratified programming and segregated views. Tertiary level: Everyone else,” wrote the article, partially taking blame for the waste of life and for overhyping this bicoastal war. “Black America’s cry for power, as reflected through the braggadocios swagger of hip-hop, has mixed with the worship of the almighty dollar to form a volatile Molotov cocktail.”201 Unable to escape the influence of mainstream commercialism, as well as their own realness and loyalty to both hip hop’s principles and their ‘street values and gang cultures,’ Tupac and Biggie succumbed to this deadly combination of ingredients. The deaths of hip hop’s greatest stars signaled the beginning of the end for this era in hip hop’s history.

1998 marked the end of one era in hip hop’s history and the beginning of another, one which embraced a rampant commercialism, excess materialism, and frivolous consumption, later simply called “the Bling Bling” era.202 Scholar Jeffrey Ogbar recognized: “By 1998 hip-hop records outsold every other genre of music in the United States. From cinema, clothing lines, magazines, and American vernacular, hip-hop’s influence…made an indelible mark in popular culture.”203 Dethroning the reign of the East and West Coasts, the South suddenly emerged as the newest, most profitable, and most dominant region and format for hip hop music. “At the end of the decade, songs by southern MCs accounted for between 30 and 40 percent of hit singles on the hip-hop charts. By the early 2000s, that number was close to 60 percent. The Dirty South…was supreme,”204 wrote Adam Bradley about the South’s rise to dominance in hip hop and its ramifications.

201 The Source, January 1997, no. 88, 80-81.
202 The Source, June 2006, no. 200, 63.
One article coming to terms with the meaning of these changes in the mainstream commodification of hip hop culture for its future wrote: “What this means, friends, Romans and countrymen, is that our beloved hip hop has fully entered the zone of commodified culture…Final analysis: the marriage of hip hop and capitalist/corporate dictates is here to stay. Get used to it, learn to use it. Don’t abuse it.” Adam Bradley added: “In the 1990s hip-hop went mainstream, shaping American culture even as hip-hop was still shaping itself….The 1990s now stand as perhaps the most important decade in hip-hop for the ways it made use of the past and predicted the future.”

From 1995-1998, riding the wave of increasing globalization, incredible American economic growth, and the explosion of internet and computer technologies to national and international prominence in mainstream society, hip hop music and culture’s growth and prevalence as it spread across the nation and the globe marked its rise from periphery of society to mainstream and worldwide commercialization. During this time, hip hop also developed distinctive regional sounds, styles, and identities, namely in the West Coast and the South, which challenged New York’s hegemony, trend setting, and dominance over the culture and its music. Furthermore, hip hop experienced rampant mainstream commoditization, and widespread cooptation by corporate interests. Thus, during 1995-1998, because of the crystallization of hip hop culture in corporate and mainstream American society, the hip hop nation struggled to maintain its realness and trueness to its traditional identities and foundational values in the face of cooptation and assimilation from mainstream and corporate America. By the end of the decade, hip hop manifested itself as both a multibillion dollar industry, and as the nation’s

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205 The Source, January 1997, no. 88, 98-100.
number one selling musical genre,\textsuperscript{207} highlighting an important shift toward a new era in hip hop’s ongoing development.

\textsuperscript{207} Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, \textit{Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap} (Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 2007), 4-5. In 1996 hip hop experienced its first billion-dollar year, and in 1998 it outsold every other genre of music for the first time. Due to these and other considerations in hip hop’s development before the year 2000 led Ogbar to proclaim, “[Hip hop’s] impact is unquestionable.”
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