HIP-HOP OVERVIEW

Hip-hop is huge. It has gone from folk culture to mass culture, from U.S. to global. It describes both a generation and an attitude. It can refer to music, dance, graffiti, language, fashion, and general style. It’s even gone to church and become “holy hip-hop.” Listen to the words of KRS-One explaining the essence of hip-hop:

... we are advocating that hip-hop is not, just a music, it is an attitude, it is an awareness, it is a way to view the world. So rap music, is something we do, but HIP-HOP, is something we live. And we look at hip-hop, in it's 9 elements; which is breaking, emceeing, graffiti art, deejaying, beatboxing, street fashion, street language, street knowledge, and street entrepenuralism - trade and business....
(from “HipHop Knowledge”)

Folk music, like folk or country music, can be produced by and for a particular traditional (or sub-) cultural group. Reggae, punk or grunge, and maybe gospel, were tied to a particular cultural constituency before crossing over or going mainstream to become part of popular mass culture. Something is always gained and lost in the transition from folk art to pop art.

Hip-hop was a folk art of South Bronx streets (NYC) in the 1970s. Its origins and history have been noted by many. Some say the girls grew tired of gang-banging and drugs and wanted to dance. Most tell of dance clubs and street corner dancing where DJs set up their stuff—sometimes plugging into public street lights. MC’s learned to keep control and keep the beat going in between records with rhyming and jivin’. Leaders such as Afrika Bombaataa (Assim) developed a movement (like the Zulu Nation) to express this turning from gangs to positive arts.

Hip-hop was more than fun and entertainment; it was an alternative to negative violence that produced positive self-esteem and community.

The basic elements of hip-hop are often given as break-dancing, graffiti, rapping and DJing. To catch the style and beat of classic hip-hop, one may watch Charlie Ahearn’s “Wild Style” or Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant’s “Style Wars” (both can be rented or bought quite reasonably).

It’s not easy to describe the evolution (and, some older heads would say, devolution) of rap and hip-hop. Understandably, both black and white observers of the social scene were reluctant to take rap to task for its extremes of self-adulation, exploitation of sex, denigration of women, and glorification of violence. Critics did begin to appear, however. Rap and hip-hop have been analyzed and critiqued by Adam Sexton, ed. (1995) Rap on Rap: Straight Up Talk
on Hip-Hop Culture and Nelson George (1998) Hip-Hop America. Spike Lee's "Bamboozled" also raises serious questions, not only about the white entertainment business, but about black performers who may be selling out.

Efrem Smith is a speaker and writer on hip-hop; he is also a pastor who has innovatively used hip-hop in building his youthful and multiethnic urban church. Here's how he describes this music and culture:

True hip-hop heads understand that hip-hop isn't just about music; it's a culture, a way of life, a language, a fashion, a set of values, and a unique perspective. Hip-hop is an economy; it's the ability to take the inner-city negative cash flow system of hustling, pushing, pimping, and banging, and turn it into a multi-million—or possibly even billion—dollar business. Hip-hop encompasses groups like Public Enemy using rap to address racism, oppression, and poverty, and then their leader "Chuck D" turning it into a new political movement getting urban young adults active in ways reminiscent of the days of the civil rights movement.

Hip-hop tells the stories of the multiethnic urban youth and the communities they live in, though the lives of inner-city African-Americans take center stage. Hip-hop is about inner-city and lower-class life. It's about trying to live out the American dream from the bottom up. It's about trying to make something out of nothing. Hip-hop is about the youth culture of New York City taking over the world. Hip-hop is about dance, art, expression, pain, love, racism, sexism, broken families, hard times, overcoming adversity, and the search for God. Anyone who looks at hip-hop and just sees rap music doesn't truly understand the history and the current influence hip-hop has on the whole youth culture.

Bakari Kitwana, in the book The Hip-Hop Generation writes: "I have established the birth years 1965-1984 as the age group for the hip-hop generation. However, those at the end of the civil rights/black power generation were essentially the ones who gave birth to the hip-hop movement that came to define the hip-hop generation, even though they are not technically hip-hop generationers. Those folks, who were right at the cusp, were too young to be defined by civil rights/black power and too old to be deemed hip-hop generationers."

I was born in 1969, so I am a part of the hip-hop generation (Efrem continues). I watched hip-hop evolve from underground house parties in the basements of my friends' houses to the first Run DMC video on cable television to today's rap millionaires like Sean "Puffy" Combs, Master P, Suge Knight, and Russell Simmons. These rich African-American men are more than just rappers; as a matter of fact Russell Simmons doesn't even rap. Russell Simmons has been behind the scenes of hip-hop—developing it from rap artists and groups like L.L. Cool J. and Kurtis Blow to films like Krush Groove and Tougher Than Leather to
clothing lines like Phat Farm. Russell Simmons, a true pioneer of the culture, opened the door so that others in the movement like Sean Combs could start his own Bad Boy record label and develop his own clothing line, Sean John. Efrem Smith is senior pastor of The Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota as well as an Itinerant Speaker with Kingdom Building Ministries and author of *Raising Up Young Heroes*. Check out more of this article in our Worship Overview or see the whole article at [www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/urban/hip-hop.php](http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/urban/hip-hop.php)

Bakari Kitwana (2002) *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*, as Efrem Smith has pointed out, talks not only about rap and hip-hop as entertainment, but analyzes generations. Most analyses of generations (Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, etc.) are white-oriented. Kitwana does great service by distinguishing between Civil Rights Blacks and the Hip-Hop generation (first Old School Rappers and then younger Gangsta Rappers). He outlines the significant cultural and political contributions of the Hip-Hop Generation: Russell Simmons, Lauryn Hill, Conrad Muhammad, Hashim Shomari, and others. The book throws out a challenge, with concrete examples, as to how hip-hop can serve its people and the common good.

"Taki," a Greek American teenager signed or tagged himself in 1972, is said to be the first writer or bomber "to go all city" and begin the graffiti movement in New York. Nancy Macdonald (2001) took ethnographic research to the yards and walls of graffiti artists. Her persistence and skills allowed her to tell stories “about the (male) young and the nameless and their search for respect, status and masculine identity at a time in life when this is often hard to find.” Her book is *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*. Here’s what some of the young men she came to know said about their art:

At around 15 I was told by my parents that I was adopted and I guess the shock of hearing that put me in a situation where I didn’t know who I was, kind of thing. And there was this happening outside on the streets where I could suddenly become an anonymous person and create a new identity for myself, which is pretty much what I used graffiti for, to create an identity which I was certain of.  (Fortuna 2000)

You can be an underground celebrity within your own community, your own setting.  (Sae 6)

You know, it’s because you can never be famous in the higher life, you know, you’re nobody, you’re being looked down at, you know. So we had to find a way to become movie stars in our own way.  (Jel)
Like if you paint somewhere and you go back there, you feel like you belong... there’s a bit of you there. (Stylo)

It’s a great thrill to do something then come back the next day and know that people are seeing that, but, at the same time, they don’t know who you are. You never get, like, personal fame, you know, your name’s famous, but you’re never really famous. (Zaki)

I repeat these stories because we usually hear about rappers and dancers, less often of writers or taggers. Today, it’s mostly about celebrities, sales and salaries. But these explanations from the artists themselves speak about the origins of hip-hop and what it all meant back there—and what it still represents to many unknown and rising hip-hop artists.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your experience with hip-hop? What stories do you have to tell?
2. How do you explain the global significance of hip-hop?
3. What more do you want to know about the history of hip-hop? What are your questions and comments about this history?
4. How do you think hip-hop ought to be judged from within its own community and from without?
5. Where is hip-hop today, and where do you think it is going in the future? Since hip-hop has gone mainstream, and in a sense been given away, who can legitimately contribute to its continued development?
6. Do you think there is a place for hip-hop in a faith community’s worship? Why not or how so?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Hip-hop cannot be ignored; it is too big, too far-reaching, too important.
2. Some feel that hip-hop as art cannot be criticized. That seems to be a misunderstanding, both of freedom of expression and the nature of art and cultural criticism.
3. Bakari Kitwana’s challenge is for hip-hop to use its great energy for its own people’s and the common good of all.

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