

An Ode to Hip Hop

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In honor of Hip Hop's 50th Anniversary, I've been pondering how Hip Hop¹ has impacted my life, when I fell in love with Hip Hop, and my favorite Hip Hop experiences. I first met Hip Hop when I was in eighth grade. The first Hip Hop jam I ever owned was the Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* (1979). It was given to me by my best and longest friend Renie for my eighth-grade graduation! I remember how excited I was to get it, especially from her since she didn't like Rap as much as I did but she knew how much it meant to me and that's what made it the perfect gift. I remember listening to it over and over again on my little record player that looked like a light blue suitcase with an all-white turntable in my grandmother's project apartment. I know they got sick of hearing it, but it was the only real Jam I had. To that point, it had only been used to play my Disney classics like the 'Bear Necessities' from *The Jungle Book*.

Well they, like the rest of the world, had to get used to it because Hip Hop was here to stay!

From the Streets

A cousin and I reminisced recently on how we grew up on the West Side of Chicago and how it shaped our lives. He was especially struck by the prominence of a particular song when thinking about his upbringing: *Gangsterism* by Ghetto Boys.

It describes everything I saw growing up on the West Side of Chicago, where the big fish always ate the little fish. The different people that we idolize and the different reasons why we idolize them. All of the dysfunctions. And our family that strengthened us to grow up to be the people that we are today. Those of us who were strong enough to survive addictive personalities and generational curses that were passed from generation to generation; from alcoholism to substance abuse from my mother's father, our cousins, and our friends. I thank God for the deliverance that he gave me to make me into the man that I am today. Sprink (2023)².

Here is a taste from the artists themselves:

*Seven years old, I'm lookin up to the gangstas in the hood
Cause to me and my cousins, yeah, they represented good...
I used to hang out by the ballroom and study the gangsta style
The way they talk, the way they walk, the way they act
The way they wore that gangsta hat
Tilted, rim laid flat out...
Yeah, comin up fast, clockin' cash, straight gangstaism.*

By the Geto Boys (originally spelled Ghetto Boys) Houston, Texas (1993).

This is where we can notice the role of *the streets* shaping lives and the significance of *rap music* that converged and manifested in urban environments to produce what we have seen in

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Hip Hop. As an urban social geographer, this intersectionality place, space, and art intrigues me and I want to know more.

Former rap artist and businessman, William aka Mac City Salaam, reminds us how the streets shaped Hip Hop and vice versa:

Rap music along with athletics was the only thing that brought all factions together in this gang-infested city. We had GDs, BDs, Vice Lords, Mickey Cobras, Cobra Stones. We had everything and we had one thing in common and that was the love of music. We could go to any neighborhood and perform without having any problems. Before Hip Hop athletes were the only ones that enjoyed that provision in this gangster town. If you were a ball player, you could go play ball anywhere you wanted to. That's before the drug industry took the term Baller. Ballers played basketball for real and could travel in this gang-infested city with no problems (2023).

Perhaps here is where we can see gender differences in urban areas at play more clearly. Both of these are male cousins. Their experiences on the streets of the Chi were different than mine. Girl gangs weren't abundant in the 80s. Additionally, I was a bookworm and a homebody so the streets didn't influence me as much as they did my male relatives. As a result, it is clear to me that the streets didn't seem to devour the sisters as much as they did the brothers in the same ways. That's not to say the streets were safe for women as I detail in my memoir, [Going from the Project to PhD: Transcending My Geography](#) (2015) and as Tupac/2Pac raps explicitly in *Brenda's Got A Baby* (1991) and *Dear Mama* (1995) respectively:

- *Well, let me show ya how it affects our whole community*

*Now Brenda really never knew her moms and her dad was a
Junky, puttin' death to his arms, it's sad 'cause I bet
Brenda doesn't even know*

Just 'cause you're in the ghetto doesn't mean you can't grow (you can't grow)...

Now Brenda's gotta make her own way

Can't go to her family, they won't let her stay

No money, no babysitter, she couldn't keep a job

- *And even as a crack fiend, mama*

You always was a Black queen, mama

I finally understand

For a woman it ain't easy trying to raise a man

You always was committed

A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how you did it

There's no way I can pay you back, but the plan

Is to show you that I understand; you are appreciated

Let's consider the connection of being raised by Baby Boomers which provided us a greater sense of God, connectedness, and conscientiousness, as opposed to what we are witnessing Hip Hop became as part of what it has of late in the microwave generation. William puts it like this:

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Hip-hop also created a microwave generation. The Microwave generation's quest is for wealth: *I want it. I want it right now. And if I don't get it right now, I'm going to die trying.* There's nothing more important than the quest for wealth. But Hip Hop has survived. It's in the very fabric of our generations. The reason we survived is because we were raised by Baby Boomers who had foundations and the values of Baby Boomers. But as teenagers, we were manipulated. If hip-hop would've stayed in its purest form it would've strengthened our community. It would've uplifted the family and it would've created Black pride. But that's not what the *powers that be* wanted. The record executives invested in the prison complex and if you weren't talking about sex, violence, and guns, you weren't going to get a record deal. It just was not happening.

Story

As an educator, I was inspired, not only by the title but by the communication straight to young people. Accordingly, my favorite Hip Hop jam was the *Miseducation of Laureen Hill* (1998), hands-down no contest, it spoke to me in so many ways. The narration was touching because it was young people using their voices to express how they felt. This is so important for the development of young minds and the correction of fruitless pursuits.

That's par for the course for me since I was really into Conscious Rap; I love music with a message. I got into listening to others expressing their experiences through storytelling through their songs, raps, and reggae. These artists were trying to tell the world something and I wanted to hear what they had to say. Learning through story is a powerful tool that has been around since the beginning of time and perfected by Hip Hop artists. That's what drew me into Hip Hop. For so many of us who go unseen in this world, this was an opportunity to at least make sure we were heard by somebody, even if it was ourselves. From its humble beginnings in the Bronx to its stratospheric rise and global impact Hip Hop has made a definite impression on this world.

My Black/African ecstatic was heavily influenced by Hip Hop. Artists like KRS-1, Arrested Development, the Fugees, Tupac, and the like brought me so much comfort, fire, and gratitude. They let us know we had no business being ashamed of our Africaness, sense of self-expression, or truth-telling. These artists' very being was political, and I loved it! Public Enemy said best in their classic *Fight The Power* (1990):

Gotta give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death

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We got to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power
What we need is awareness, we can't get
careless
You say what is this?
My beloved lets get down to business
Mental self defensive fitness
Don't rush the show
You gotta go for what you know
Make everybody see, in order to fight the
powers that be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power



Artists like these simultaneously taught us, affirmed us, and made an everlasting impression upon us as sowers of worthiness, capableness, and indeed as responsible for telling our truths to each other, for each other, and to the world!

Everyone's encounter with Hip Hop is unique in some ways. While traveling in the military, William aka Mac City Salaam, encountered brothers from the East Coast, mostly New Yorkers, and they were solely into Rap Music.

It was the first time I heard Ladies Love Cool J. I was in L-O-V-E with his energy, but when I truly fell in love with Hip Hop is when I heard Eric B and Rakim Allah. "I was truly sold, and I said that's what I wanna do for the rest of my life." My sister told me, long before Nike, Just Do IT!

And Do IT he did. He joined the movement, the revolution, and the history-making that is: Hip Hop.

By the time I got back to Chicago from the military, rap music was being listened to on the radio and at some parties, but it was still predominantly house music and stepper music. So, we had to find like-minded people who also loved Hip Hop. That's how we went across the city introducing rap music to the city of Chicago.

In Chi's South Suburbs a young poet, Princess Prime Time T, describes her first introduction to Hip Hop.

My morning radio alarm woke me up to *Rapper's Delight* and that song was the first time I heard hip-hop. I was so amazed. I mean, when I got to the bus stop with the other classmates I was like, "Did you all hear that"?!

I could talk over the beat, because I am not a singer, and I was already writing poetry. I was just a freshman in high school when I heard it and I was like "I could do this." So, to be able to do this over music was good!

LL was a hit for her too but for a different reason and one that made us all tune and listen while holding somebody close. "I don't think I have a favorite but the one that stood out to me was LL Cool J's *I Need Love* (1987). I don't think we heard a love song, so to speak, that you could slow dance off of like that before".

The Movement

Like most early adopters, we were moved not only by the music with its rhythm, beat, and flow but also by the messages being expressed. One way to express it is by recognizing the manifestation of the significance of a song that hits just right and stimulates the emotions, heart, and mind establishing a genuine connection with a lyric, a line, or a story.

I was ALL IN!

So much so, that in the 90s, I was part of the rap group Mac City Salaam and the Vision, I was also the 1st and only Secretary, for the newly formed United Nations of Hip Hop. We had big hopes for a movement spreading in Chicago but with an international reach. I remember our first meeting was on the South Side of Chicago; I believe it was in a park district fieldhouse. Hip Hop heads from all over Chicago converged on that park to discuss something that we thought could change Chicago's trajectory within the Hip Hop community. There had to be 60 of us trying to carve out what it is we wanted to do in the world of Hip Hop, how we wanted to do it, and who would be involved. Of course, the rapper Mac City Salaam was there, Smurf and I were there representing the Vision, Cassius D, Rass Farron, Common Sense (better known as Common these days), Twista was there and so many others that I had forgotten. I'm sure the Chicago rap heads will straighten me out and make me remember more accurately. As a part of Mac City Salaam and the Vision, I was made secretary (probably because I was one of the only women there). But I didn't mind because I felt like I was going to be a part of something really special. It was one of my first leadership roles outside of school. We had cards printed and distributed to promote the movement's work, shows, and parties but that's about as official as we got. Rap took off exponentially and life happened so that was the end of the United Nations of Hip Hop.

Mac City Salaam and the Vision

My experience with Mac City Salaam and the Vision truly is memorable. We spent what seemed like a couple of years listening to Mac City, spit rhymes, while Smurf spraypainted our clothes, and backdrops, and carved out leather Afrocentric medallions for us to sell to promote and sustain the group. We had all of Hip Hop represented: rap, graffiti art, fashion, and dance. This entrepreneurial spirit didn't stop there, we sold Chicago Bull medallions during their championship legacy led by Michael Jordan and the starting lineup of "Your Chicago Bulls"!

My professor colleagues are still waiting for 'The Lost Videos' to show up with me in my African garb dancing to the beat of my cousin rapping about what the Chicago streets had taught him. The brother had a lot to say, and we were all ears. I remember performing at the Operation Push Coalition Auditorium. I'll always treasure this photo because it captured what we were doing to advance our stories through Hip Hop. Although I have not discovered any videos of our time together, I'll always cherish this photo. It is proof that we were trying to make a difference and contribute to furthering Hip Hop as a legitimate genre and a force for good because it was still under question (see photo).

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Mac City Salaam and the Vision, Operation Push Coalition Auditorium, Chicago, 1991

Before Rap and rap lyrics were being seen as criminal, we were aiming to produce rap music and Hip Hop performances that would elevate the minds of people. Mac City's lyrics were raw, but they weren't laced with superfluous profanity, criminal acts, or egregious womanizing. We wanted our performances to be uplifting and forward-thinking music grounded in our African aesthetic.

Although I saw my first rap concert, Naughty By Nature at the Hard Rock Café in Marina City, Chicago with my husband Eric, it was the Ladies of Hip Hop who captured me. I remember being drawn to artists like Queen Latifah's messages:

U.N.I.T.Y., Love a black man from (You got to let him know)
infinity to infinity (You ain't a b!7@# or a ho)!

Huh, I punched him dead in his eye and said "Who you calling a b!7@#?"

The Queen slayed us with anthems, one after another: *Ladies First*, *Come Into My House*, *Court's In Session*, and *Fly Girl*; she was Killing The Game!

Then DJs like Farley "Jackmaster" Funk started mixing House Music³ with Rap that introduced *Hip House* to the world fusing jams like MC Lyte's *Lyte As A Rock*, "L-Y-T-E" and *Slave 2 the Rhythm* gave me L-I-F-E on the dance floor! The House beats and her flow made us dance all night long. I mean, we danced until we were sweaty, we kissed our hairstyles goodbye, and were ready for breakfast! One of those friends was Princess Prime Time T, one of the baddest female rappers on the Chicago rap scene then. I was proud to background dance for her as well as Mac City. For me, I will listen to female rappers with sick flow that's saying something over misogynistic mumbling rappers with their toxic masculinity any day all day long! Wanting to

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hear more of what women had to say is what led me later to get into Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill, India Arie and the like.

The Winds of Change

We were heavily influenced by the uplifting nature of that side of Hip Hop, but like everything else change comes. William (Mac City) puts it this way:

We had Conscious Rap: Public Enemy, Das EFX, Zulu Nation, Poor Righteous Teachers, and Afrika Bambaataa. This led us to have one of the first chapters of the Zulu nation in Chicago. We had the Rappers Only Platform and the United Nations of Hip Hop.

Then we had the birth of Gangster Rap with NWA becoming prominent.

Soon after that, they wrecked the industry. The record companies in the record industry arguably decided to stop pushing Conscious Rap, self-love rap, and self-lifting rap and started to promote destruction which was gangster rap. They came into our community and enticed the young men by promoting drug selling, violence, undisciplined pursuits of wealth, and the destruction of the Black woman. I really like Jeezy but I can't listen to him for very long because he makes me want to quit my profession and sell Birds (kilos of cocaine). Now he is a millionaire; he doesn't talk that way or dress that way anymore after being an instrument of killing by trying to live the life he describes and promoted.

It's a slippery slope when it comes to Hip Hop and the love I have for hip-hop it's because although it aided and assisted in destroying our community, it also created more Black millionaires than this country has ever seen. While simultaneously creating the most Black millionaires in this country it also destroyed the family unit. It was the commercials for funeral homes, penitentiaries, and cemeteries. It was the commercial for the drug rehabilitation industry. It's successfully destroyed the Black man and now it's destroying the Black woman by promoting a spirit of whoredom.

The Fix

While in 2023 we are celebrating Hip Hop's 50th Anniversary we keep watchful eyes and perked ears, hopeful hearts, with a commitment to elevating the best of what Hip Hop has for the world. Succinctly stated by William, "It's going to take Hip Hop to save Hip Hop. No one else is going to do it." This is an excellent invitation and opportunity for all of us to consider what our individual and collective roles and parts will be in shaping Hip Hop's future.

In addition, Princess T reminds us that Hip Hop is not a monolith; there has always been waves of different sounds within Hip Hop and it still has room to change, shift, and grow.

The way that Hip Hop moved through the years and decades gave us different beats and styles. It's more than what R&B can do, it's more than what Rock, Country, and Classical can do. The beats shifted so much within Hip Hop that has been woven into the yarn of Hip Hop. You can make it funky, there was an electronic era aka Hip House, they made New Jack Swing, and they made Trap Music. They are all part of the yarn of Hip Hop.

So, in the meantime Hip Hop, we long for your turning the tide from the devolving messages of destruction to your triumphant prominence in greatness as the proud African-inspired art form that we miss.

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With Honor,
Dr. Yvette L. Pye

¹ While the dates may still be up for debate, the term "hip-hop" was first coined by Keith Cowboy, a member of the group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, to describe the music and culture that emerged from African American and Latino communities in the Bronx, New York City, during the 1970s. It is believed to have been derived from the phrase "hip hop hippie," which was used in the 1960s to describe young people who were part of the counterculture movement. The term "hip" referred to being up-to-date and in the know, while "hop" referred to the rhythmic bouncing movement of the dance styles that were popular in the early days of the culture. (Grammarly, 2023)

The phrase "hippity hop" has been used for decades as a lighthearted and playful way to refer to hip hop music. However, it is not clear when exactly older people started using this phrase. It could be that it was used as a way to differentiate the new style of music from the more traditional genres that older generations were familiar with, or it could simply be a fun way to describe the bouncy, rhythmic beats of hip hop. Regardless of its origins, the phrase "hippity hop" has become a part of the cultural lexicon and is still used today as a nostalgic nod to the early days of hip hop. (Grammarly, 2023). [🗣️🗣️ ONE OF MY GREAT UNCLES USED TO SAY THIS AS A WARNING BEFORE HE WAS COMING UPSTAIRS WITH HIS BELT SO WE WOULD "STOP ALL THAT HIPPIITY HOP AND BOOMITY BOOM." 🗣️🗣️]

² Despite Growing up in a world with all cards stacked against him, **Byron Brown, AKA Sprink**, was able to obtain a career in law enforcement and successfully retire decorated and started a construction business. Supreme and Associates LLC is a general contracting company and also minority certified that provides a variety of services throughout Chicagoland. Services include rehabbing in the Summer, installing privacy fences, building decks, and rebuilding porches in the Winter. Supreme provides services to over 27 commercial sites with snow removal. "Against all odds I have been able to successfully run this business for over 10 years, helping other young men to learn the trade of carpentry electrical, plumbing, and snow removal. This is my calling with the help of God, my Lord and Savior and I answered it. Proudly, Byron Brown (AKA) Sprink

³ [Chicago House Music: A Brief History of Chicago House - 2024 - MasterClass](#)

Thanks to ALL of the contributors for their care and thoughtfulness!