Rap is a form of dance music that became popular during the early 1980s. Rap has its roots in the improvised street poetry of African-American and Hispanic teenagers in New York. The music places an emphasis on DJs who mix different tracks together, sometimes 'scratching' for increased effect.

Rap music is a central feature of hip hop culture, comprising just one of hip hop’s four basic elements: graffiti, break dancing, DJing and rapping (or MCing). First appearing in New York City’s Bronx neighborhoods in the late 1970s, hip hop began as a youth-oriented, working-class and largely Black American urban cultural movement. Since its inception, rap music has served as hip hop’s most culturally recognized and commercially successful component.

While rap’s artistic lineage can be traced back to rhythmic sounds and speech of African and Caribbean musical traditions, rap music is popularly understood as a unique African American art form, resulting from the distinctly Black American social and cultural context in which it was born. Politically defined as post-civil rights and culturally understood as post-soul, rap music’s originators were a generation of predominantly Black and Latino youth who came of age in an era where, while civil rights had been formally granted, new and more subtle – though no less devastating – racial barriers had been erected. Cloaked in a language of color blindness, new social and economic policies created an environment where poor and working-class Black and Latino urban youth faced high levels of unemployment, incarceration, police brutality, racial profiling, unaffordable and segregated urban housing, and a racially discriminatory War on Drugs policy. Both an incorporation of and reaction against 1970s disco music, rap’s post-soul aesthetic reflected the changing values within Black culture in the late 1970s, moving away from a 1960s optimism concerning the achievement of racial equality through collective political action and moral persuasion, to a more cynical and self-involved ethos. In this social and cultural context, marginalized African American, Caribbean American and Latin American adolescents voiced frustrations and aspirations through the newly emerging hip hop aesthetic.

Musically, rap’s rhythms are a product of two technological influences: the introduction of the “mixer,” which allowed disco DJs to seamlessly flow recorded music from one song to another; and early hip hop artists’ incorporation of Jamaican sound mixing – a style called “dub” – which isolated and then emphasized the strong, pulsating drum and bass lines running through reggae music. Over these beats, MCs provided spoken words, reciting rhymes often pertaining to a MC’s musical, sexual, and/or intellectual prowess; this spoken-word quality of rap music has roots in various American – and specifically African American – oral narrative traditions, most evident in the African American tradition of “toasting.”

The early years
While artists were already experimenting with precursors of hip hop music throughout the 1970s, it was the commercial popularity of the Sugarhill Gang’s 1979 song “Rapper’s Delight” that introduced rap’s unique sound to a world beyond New York’s inner city neighborhoods. The early 1980s ushered in an era of rap music characterized by the mixing and sampling of previous musical traditions, and lyrics served as soundtracks for party-like atmospheres, as well as more serious testimonials of the harsh social conditions of America’s urban poor. It was also during this time that rap music began to garner attention from major record labels (beginning with rapper Kurtis Blow’s contract with Mercury Records in late 1979), and experience crossover success in pop music. By the beginning of the mid-1980s, rap music had began to make a definitive move outside the boroughs of New York, and Los Angeles rappers emerged with their own distinct hip hop sound, dance, and style.

As the 1980s came to a close and the Reagan Administration’s trickle-down economic policies took a toll on America’s inner cities, particularly affecting Black and Hispanic youth, rap music’s lyrics became more socially critical and increasingly hardcore. Rap groups, such as Public Enemy, emerged with lyrical messages informed by a Black Nationalist perspective, and Los Angeles rappers such as Ice-T and N.W.A. highlighted the perils of the American ghetto and the corruption of society, particularly targeting law enforcement and elected officials. By the end of the decade, the unique characteristics associated with New York and California rap music had laid the groundwork for what would later become important regional differences. Today, general regional flavors are evident in hip hop music of the Northeast, the West Coast, the Midwest, and the so-called “Dirty South.”

By the turn of the decade, rap music had unequivocally become associated with big business and the commercial success of rap music was drawing considerable attention, not only from devoted fans, but also from cultural, social and political critics, both within and outside the hip hop community. More and more rappers were becoming critical of the corporate music industry’s influence on the direction of the music and on rap artists’ increasing acquiescence; this critique within hip hop laid the groundwork for the sub-genres of alternative, socially conscious and underground hip hop music. During this time, the contradictions and confrontations that had always been a part of rap music began to emerge as controversial sites of debate outside the hip hop community as well.

Debates and controversies

The 1990s witnessed several high-profile cases in which rap disputes around censorship, partisan politics and family values took center stage. These include: the 1990 obscenity charges against rap group 2 Live Crew, who were eventually acquitted; the 1992 political attack on Ice-T’s band Body Count’s “Cop Killer;” and Bill Clinton’s 1991 denouncement of Sister Souljah’s critique of Black-on-Black crime, in which she satirically suggests that Black people take a break from killing each other and have a week where they kill White people instead. These culturally visible moments in the early 1990s underscore the rising political and cultural stakes becoming associated with hip hop music.

Gang wars and the politicized rap of the 1980s translated into financial fortunes for 1990s rappers and music executives, who capitalized on the media’s seductive depiction of Los Angeles gangster culture, breathing life into the musical genre of gangsta rap. Rap music of this persuasion laid claims to street credibility and gangsta authenticity, and the genre quickly received criticism not only for its portrayal (and glorification) of violence and drug culture, but also for its reinforcement of stereotypes pertaining to the dangerous nature of poor Black and Latino youth. Yet, by mid-decade, gangsta rap was charged with being co-opted by not-so-real gangstas trying to find success in the changing music scene. This
infiltration of allegedly wannabe or artificially-cultivated gangstas challenged the integrity of a genre that relied heavily on notions of authenticity and lived gangsta experience.

The commercial and musical success of Los Angeles gangsta rap, most notably ushered in by Dr Dre’s *The Chronic* (1992) followed by Snoop Doggy Dogg’s *Doggystyle* (1993), served to legitimate, for the first time, West Coast rappers’ claims to lyrical and musical authority, which fueled an East Coast–West Coast rap rivalry that had been smoldering for years, fanned further by the media’s sensationalized coverage and industry executives’ encouragement. The untimely murders of superstar rappers Tupac Shakur in 1996 and the Notorious B.I.G. in 1997 served as wake-up calls for the antagonistic coastal rap rivalry, in which the world lost two of hip hop’s greatest, most talented rappers.

Today, in addition to its explicit lyrical – and real-life – portrayals of violence and drug culture, rap music stands at the center of other serious social and cultural debates, including concerns over the music’s misogyny and heterosexism; detachment from political roots; accommodation to industry pressures and a majority-White consumer base; the hyper-materialism of its “bling-bling” ethos; and portrayals of hyper, exploitative sexuality, or “hip hop pornography.” But rap music has never suffered from a lack of fans willing to defend various aspects of the music’s most controversial features and hip hop music, either in spite of or perhaps because of its contentious characteristics, remains a central force in the lives of its devotees.

**Future directions**

Rap music’s success in the decades since its inception in the late 1970s is a strong indication of its sustaining presence and unforgettable mark on the world of music. Artists from around the globe are creating new and distinct styles of rap, infusing it with other cultural and national music traditions. These rap-inspired offshoots integrate hip hop sensibilities with local musical aesthetics, producing such creations as reggaeton music, influenced by Puerto Rican and Panamanian traditions, Japan’s nip-hop and South Africa’s kwaito. Strong hip hop music communities thrive in Cuba, Ghana, France, Germany, Kenya, Brazil, New Zealand, Poland, Uganda, Turkey, Italy, Spain and many other locations across the world.

Since the debut of “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979, rap music has gone through many changes, innovations and, some might argue, regressions. Nonetheless, rap music continues to serve as a source of social critique and artistic expression. Rap music also continues to function as a powerful component of hip hop culture, and the incredible mobilizing potential of hip hop is increasingly tapped as an organizing force for various political, activist, civic engagement and youth education projects. Hip hop fans, frustrated by negative portrayals of women in the music, as well as by rap’s often monolithic and homophobic representations of sexuality, are talking back under the banner of hip hop feminism. Hip hop and hip hop music have spawned in more directions than ever imagined back in the Bronx in the late 1970s when the borough’s youth made music – and history – with just “two turntables and a microphone.” [VC]

**Key readings**


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