

Hip Hop Planet

Whether you trace it to New York’s South Bronx or the villages of West Africa, hip-hop has become the voice of a generation demanding to be heard.

By James McBride

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1 This is my nightmare: *My daughter comes home with a guy and says, “Dad, we’re getting married.” And he’s a rapper, with a mouthful of gold teeth, a do-rag on his head, muscles popping out his arms, and a thug attitude. And then the nightmare gets deeper, because before you know it, I’m hearing the pitter-patter of little feet, their offspring, cascading through my living room, cascading through my life, drowning me with the sound of my own hypocrisy, because when I was young, I was a knucklehead, too, hearing my own music, my own sounds. And so I curse the day I saw his face, which is a reflection of my own, and I rue the day I heard his name, because I realize to my horror that rap—music seemingly without melody, sensibility, instruments, verse, or harmony, music with no beginning, end, or middle, music that doesn’t even seem to be music—rules the world. It is no longer my world. It is his world. And I live in it. I live on a hip-hop planet.*

High-stepping

- 2 I remember when I first heard rap. I was standing in the kitchen at a party in Harlem. It was 1980. A friend of mine named Bill had just gone on the blink. He slapped a guy, a total stranger, in the face right in front of me. I can’t remember why. Bill was a fellow student. He was short-circuiting. Problem was, the guy he slapped was a big guy, a dude wearing a do-rag who’d crashed the party with three friends, and, judging by the fury on their faces, there would be no Martin Luther King moments in our immediate future.
- 3 There were no white people in the room, though I confess I wished there had been, if only to hide the paleness of my own frightened face. We were black and Latino students about to graduate from Columbia University’s journalism school, having learned the whos, whats, wheres, whens, and whys of American reporting. But the real storytellers of the American experience came from the world of the guy that Bill had just slapped. They lived less than a mile (1.6 kilometers) from us in the South Bronx. They had no journalism degrees. No money. No credibility. What they did have, however, was talent.
- 4 Earlier that night, somebody tossed a record on the turntable, which sent my fellow students stumbling onto the dance floor, howling with delight, and made me, a jazz lover, cringe. It sounded like a broken record. It was a version of an old hit record called “Good Times,” the same four bars looped over and over. And on top of this loop, a kid spouted a rhyme about how he was the best disc jockey in the world. It was called “Rapper’s Delight.” I thought it was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard. More ridiculous than Bill slapping that stranger.

- 5 Bill survived that evening, but in many ways, I did not. For the next 26 years, I high-stepped past that music the way you step over a crack in the sidewalk. I heard it pounding out of cars and alleyways from Paris to Abidjan, yet I never listened. It came rumbling out of boomboxes from Johannesburg to Osaka, yet I pretended not to hear. I must have strolled past the corner of St. James Place and Fulton Street in my native Brooklyn where a fat kid named Christopher Wallace, aka Biggie Smalls, stood amusing his friends with rhyme, a hundred times, yet I barely noticed. I high-stepped away from that music for 26 years because it was everything I thought it was, and more than I ever dreamed it would be, but mostly, because it held everything I wanted to leave behind.
- 6 In doing so, I missed the most important cultural event in my lifetime.
- 7 Not since the advent of swing jazz in the 1930s has an American music exploded across the world with such overwhelming force. Not since the Beatles invaded America and Elvis packed up his blue suede shoes has a music crashed against the world with such outrage. This defiant culture of song, graffiti, and dance, collectively known as hip-hop, has ripped popular music from its moorings in every society it has permeated. In Brazil, rap rivals samba in popularity. In China, teens spray-paint graffiti on the Great Wall. In France it has been blamed, unfairly, for the worst civil unrest that country has seen in decades.
- 8 Its structure is unique, complex, and at times bewildering. Whatever music it eats becomes part of its vocabulary, and as the commercial world falls into place behind it to gobble up the powerful slop in its wake, it metamorphoses into the Next Big Thing. It is a music that defies definition, yet defines our collective societies in immeasurable ways. To many of my generation, despite all attempts to exploit it, belittle it, numb it, classify it, and analyze it, hip-hop remains an enigma, a clarion call, a cry of “I am” from the youth of the world. We’d be wise, I suppose, to start paying attention.

The City of Gods

- 9 Some call the Bronx River Houses the City of Gods, though if God has been by lately, he must’ve slipped out for a chicken sandwich. The 10 drab, red-brick buildings spread out across 14 acres (5.7 hectares), coming into view as you drive east across the East 174th Street Bridge. The Bronx is the hallowed holy ground of hip-hop, the place where it all began. Visitors take tours through this neighborhood now, care of a handful of fortyish “old-timers,” who point out the high and low spots of hip-hop’s birthplace.
- 10 It is a telling metaphor for the state of America’s racial landscape that you need a permit to hold a party in the same parks and playgrounds that produced the music that changed the world. The rap artists come and go, but the conditions that produced them linger. Forty percent of New York City’s black males are jobless. One in three black males born in 2001 will end up in prison. The life expectancy of black men in the U.S. ranks below that of men in Sri Lanka and Colombia. It took a massive hurricane in New Orleans for the United States to wake up to its racial realities.

11 That is why, after 26 years, I have come to embrace this music I tried so hard to ignore. Hip-hop culture is not mine. Yet I own it. Much of it I hate. Yet I love it, the good of it. To confess a love for a music that, at least in part, embraces violence is no easy matter, but then again our national anthem talks about bombs bursting in air, and I love that song, too. At its best, hip-hop lays bare the empty moral cupboard that is our generation's legacy. This music that once made visible the inner culture of America's greatest social problem, its legacy of slavery, has taken the dream deferred to a global scale. Today, two percent of the Earth's adult population owns more than 50 percent of its household wealth, and indigenous cultures are swallowed with the rapidity of a teenager gobbling a bag of potato chips. The music is calling. Over the years, the instruments change, but the message is the same. The drums are pounding out a warning. They are telling us something. Our children can hear it.

12 The question is: Can we?

James McBride is a writer and music composer. He has written for many well-known newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Washington Post*. He is most well-known for his 1996 memoir, *The Color of Water*. "Hip-Hop Planet" first appeared in *National Geographic* in April of 2007 and was included in *Best African American Essays* in 2009.