Rap Music: An Education with a Beat from the Street

Catherine Tabb Powell, University of the District of Columbia*

Originating in New York City in the late 1970s, rap—a form of popular music that entails talking, or “rapping,” to a rhythmic musical background—has proved to have wide appeal and staying power. Words and rhythm are the heart of rap.¹ A vocalist (or vocalists) tells a story set to syncopation, and a disc jockey (DJ) provides the rhythm with a drum machine or by “scratching” on a turntable (rapidly moving a record back and forth under the needle to create rap’s famous swishing sound). Rap lyrics concentrate primarily on the contemporary African American experience, and the music is aimed at a market consisting primarily, but not exclusively, of African American youth. Every issue within the Black community is subject to exposition in the rap arena. Hit rap tunes have broached touchy subjects such as sex, sexism, racism, and crime; however, as some rappers claim, their goal is different from that of rhythm-and-blues artists. Rap artists, they contend, “don’t talk the love stuff, but [rather] educate the listeners” (Henderson, 1988, p. R13).

Indeed, in addition to entertainment, rap music provides a significant form of informal education for adolescents, one that extends far beyond the confines of the classroom and into their peer group circles. Whether rap is denigrated or applauded as an artistic product, it cannot be ignored as a dominant means of expression within contemporary African American adolescent culture. For Black youth in particular rap provides a powerful force for identity, solidarity, and emotional reinforcement.

**The Origins of Rap**

Unlike many musical fads and fashions, rap’s arrival was not engineered by Tin Pan Alley (the commercial music industry) or other big business interests. Instead it emerged from the streets of inner-city neighborhoods as a genuine reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban Black youth in this, the last quarter of the 20th century. Rap is essentially a homemade, street-level musical genre. Moreover, rap is part

---

*The author is a member of the African American Writers Guild.
¹The terms “rap” and “hip-hop” can be used interchangeably. Hip-hop refers to the beat of the music and rap to the rhythmic talking over the beat. Rap has three classifications: (1) “quick rap” (one rapper talks to another) (2) “life-line” or “hard-core” rap (containing explicit lyrics); and (3) “commercial rap” (hip-hop and dance rap).
of a tradition of oral recitation that originated in Africa many centuries ago. This tradition is exemplified by the West African griot, or troubadour/storyteller. To the accompaniment of drums or other percussive instruments, griots entertain and educate their audiences by reciting tribal history and current events. Their performances are often embellished by satirical asides, proverbs, jokes, praise, and ridicule (Nicholls, 1991). Talking against a musical background has also been employed in African American gospel, jazz, and rhythm-and-blues music throughout this century. Popular recording artists such as Cab Calloway, Eddie Jefferson, Bo Diddley, and James Brown have utilized this tradition.

However, the most important influence on rap has not been commercial recordings but the street-level practices of "toasting," "capping," "joning," "signifying," "shucking and jiving," "sounding," "running it down," "gripping," "copping a plea," and "playing the dozens." Traditionally, all these practices have allowed inner-city dwellers, particularly males, to compete in their use of imagery and verbal skills. Then and now, when Black men gather together they often engage in such verbal contests. According to H. "Rap" (Hubert Gerold) Brown (1972, pp. 205–206), former head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), African American males "play the dozens for recreation, like white folks play Scrabble." Brown explains that the dozens is a mean game because it often involves an exchange of negative comments about members of an opponent's family, especially his mother, that can be extremely humiliating for the loser. Signifying, Brown contends, is another verbal dueling technique usually employed after a battle of the dozens to "cut your opponent some slack" (make him feel good or bad). Again, Brown maintains, before one can signify, "you got to be able to rap." In his own youth Brown claims that he was seldom humiliated in any kind of verbal contest: "That's why they call me Rap, 'cause I could rap." His ability exemplifies the varying degrees and types of oral expertise found within Black urban culture at all levels, from the street corner to the pulpit.

In the early 1970s the radical rap poetry of the group The Last Poets formed a dominant prototype for later rap artists such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, the Sugarhill Gang, the Fat Boys, Kool Moe Dee, Run DMC, and Big Daddy Kane. The Last Poets consisted of poets Omar Ben Hassen, Alafia Pudim, Abidun Oyewole, and percussionist Nilaja. They recorded on the independent Douglas Records label, and with little radio airplay sold 160,000 copies of their first album. With conga backup the poets chanted rap poetry classics such as "The White Man's Got a God Complex," "In the Meanwhile, I Must Be Insane," and "This Is Madness." The Poets took street corner rap and used it as an assault on racism, Black self-exploitation, and stereotyped racial roles. In Harlem where they lived they were recognized and admired as stars (Cott, 1970).

During the "disco" music era, rap became popular with the street gangs in urban centers such as Harlem and the South Bronx in New York City. Rappers worked with DJs who worked two or more turntables simultaneously, switching back and forth to mix the best parts of the music (Watkins, 1984). "The Grand Wizard" (Theodore Livingston) from
the Bronx is given credit for originating the scratching technique in rap music. His sound, which was copied extensively, changed the way DJs played dance music (Greenberg, 1988). Other DJs quickly learned how to alter the mood on the dance floor by making smooth transitions in the music.

In the Bronx, the important part of the record was the break—the part of a tune in which the drums take over. . . . That was when the dancers flew and DJs began cutting between the same few bars on two turntables, extending the break into an instrumental. The important part of this transition was the part in which the drums took over, the break for the hip hop. . . . (Toop, 1984, p. 14)

Those who danced acrobatically to this break mixture became known as "break dancers." One of the two DJs given credit for originating the term "break dancing" was Clive Campbell, a Jamaican-born DJ who went by the name "Herc." Afrika Bambaataa, another DJ (and street gang leader) from the Bronx is also given credit. Herc worked at a disco in the poor section of the Bronx where he played the "most frantic sections," or the breaks, of the music over and over. Bambaataa, when challenged by a rival gang, would suggest competition by dancing instead of fighting (Greenberg, 1988, pp. 13–14).

Toop (1984) gives this account of the early days of rap:

The DJs teamed up with MCs [masters of ceremonies or "emcees"] who provided a show, creating spoken rhythms, catch phrases and a commentary about the DJ, the clientele and themselves over the beats. A style of dress grew up, a fractured image of cool, combining casual and sports wear, and the dancing was fiercely competitive. Competition was at the heart of hip hop. . . . Sneakers became high fashion . . . entertainment was provided with the kind of showoff street rap that almost any kid was capable of turning on a rival. (p. 15)

**RAP TODAY**

Currently rap is enjoying unprecedented success, but its reputation is not entirely positive. Some rappers' use of explicit language and sexual references and imagery on their albums and music videos has created resistance to rap. Obscenity and freedom of speech issues have been raised in response to the recordings of certain rap artists, notably 2 Live Crew, Ice-T, NWA (Niggas With Attitude), Slick Rick, and Ice Cube. Copyright infringement disputes and distribution problems have also posed barriers to rap's full-fledged entry into the musical mainstream. Nonetheless, several rappers and rap groups have met with notable successes and recognition in the rap arena. Some of the more renowned as well as infamous personalities of rap will be discussed in the following sections.

**Run DMC**

As the group Run DMC, Run (Joseph Simmons), DMC (Darryl McDaniels), and their DJ, Jam Master Jay (Jayson Mizell) have achieved rare longevity as rap artists. In 1984 the group produced the first rap album to be certified gold. They went on to become the first rap artists to collect two gold albums and a gold and platinum album simultaneously; the first to reach the top ten on the *Billboard* pop chart, make
Number 1 on its Black singles (45 RPM) chart, and reach the top ten on its “Hot One Hundred” singles list; the first to collect two platinum albums; and the first to top the two million copies sales mark (Grein, 1990).

**Kid n’ Play**

Christopher (Kid) Reid, a former law school candidate, and Christopher (Play) Martin, a former visual arts major whose current nickname is a shortened version of his old one (Playboy), dance and trade insults and witticisms as the rap team “Kid n’ Play.” Generally, they rap about adolescence in a sassy but playful, sly but innocent, boys-next-door fashion. The message of their musical dialogues, according to Kid, is this: “We teach people not to be afraid to be themselves, even if you look different or act different. . . . Run with it” (Perlman, 1990, p. 93). Kid, who sports the currently fashionable “hi-top fade” hairstyle, grew up in the Bronx and later moved to East Elmhurst (NY). He is the comic of the duo. Play is the suave one who plays the role of the braggart. The duo has produced a series of hit singles and low-budget videos as well as a 1988 album, “From 2 Hype,” that made the top ten on *Billboard* magazine’s Black music charts. With virtually no cross-over to the pop (popular audience) market, the album sold nearly one million copies (Seliger, 1990).

**M. C. Hammer**

One of the most popular (or, as the young people say, “bumpin’”) rappers at the time of this writing goes by the stage name M. C. Hammer. Hammer, whose real name is Stanley Kirk Burrell, is one of eight children and was raised in Oakland (CA). He acquired the nickname Hammer in the early seventies from a player with the Oakland A’s baseball team—home-run king “Hammerin’” Hank Aaron. Burrell travelled with the team as a batboy during the summer breaks for seven years (Russell, 1990). An overtly religious man, M. C. Hammer presents a clean image and his lyrics are not political. He raps about urban problems, saving young people from drugs, and the troubles of the world, and his act places more emphasis on choreographed showiness than on hard rapping. Hammer is very protective of his entourage of singers, dancers, and bodyguards, which includes some 18- and 19-year-olds. Reportedly, after each show young cast members must return directly to their hotel rooms and stay there all night or face a $100 fine (“Rap Musician,” 1990).

Hammer’s debut album, “Let’s Get It Started,” sold more than a million copies. His second album, “Please Hammer, Don’t Hurt ‘Em,” is considered the most sophisticated rap album yet to emerge. It is only the third rap album in history to stay at the top of both the pop charts

---

2 *Billboard* recently renamed its “Black Music” charts “R & B” (rhythm-and-blues) charts. The magazine maintains that the change was made because the number of non-Black people making “Black” music has escalated.
and the R & B charts for three months. More than four million copies have been sold to date (Russell, 1990).

2 Live Crew

2 Live Crew, an X-rated, underground\(^3\) rap group, recently found themselves in court because of their explicit lyrics and their inclusion of scantily clothed female dancers in their act. The much publicized group from Miami (FL), consisting of band leader Luther Campbell, Christopher Wongwon, and Mark Ross, were charged with staging an obscene performance at a Hollywood (FL) nightclub in June 1990. Throughout that summer they were under siege. Their album, “As Nasty As They Wanna Be,” which graphically describes sexual acts and celebrates male lust and violence toward submissive women, was blacklisted by a number of national parent’s groups, and a judge in southern Florida threatened record store owners with arrest if caught selling the album (McFadden, 1990).

The case drew national attention. The obscenity trial lasted for two weeks. In its countersuit, Skyy Walker Records (the group’s record label) asserted that the company’s First Amendment rights had been violated.\(^4\) Testimony from both sides was presented by several critics ranging from those who judged the groups music to be “filthy, lewd, disgusting, especially offensive to women and without any artistic merit,” to others who viewed it as “simplistic, uninteresting, [and] unoriginal.” Still others protested, “Why not arrest people for swearing on the street?” Expert witness Henry Louis Gates (now head of Harvard University’s Department of African American Studies) referred to rap lyrics as “art” and noted that “even Shakespeare used four-letter words a lot” (Parker, 1990).

In the end the prosecutor’s case failed to sway the jurors, who at times laughed openly during the trial. The jury acquitted 2 Live Crew of obscenity charges on the grounds that the group’s rights are protected by the First Amendment. After the trial 2 Live Crew leader Luther Campbell stated that the whole affair was “good for business.” Sales of the album surpassed the platinum mark (1.7 million copies), while a purified version of the album, entitled “As Clean As They Wanna Be,” sold 200,000 (Benarde, 1990).

Campbell began in the music business while attending high school. He organized dances and rap shows, and many of his amateur performers later became stars. He began producing his own records in 1985 after being cheated by other producers. His first office was a bedroom in his parents’ home. Campbell is the first to admit that the Crew’s lyrics are “sexual stuff,” but he contends the raps are “funny and raw” and

---

\(^3\)Underground rap refers to rap music that is sold in some record stores but is not played by major radio stations; nor are the videos of underground rap shown on television.

\(^4\)The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech [italics added], or the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”
inspired by the humor of popular Black comedians Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor (McFadden, 1990). Campbell’s friends claim that he is a dedicated father to his seven-year-old daughter and does not permit her to listen to the Crew’s x-rated lyrics. Moreover, Campbell spends much of his time working to improve education for Blacks. He has established college scholarships for promising Black seniors at Miami high schools, funds a business scholarship at Florida International University, donates money to the football program at Bethune–Cookman University, and contributes regularly to the United Negro College Fund (Benarde, 1990).

Public Enemy

Other rap groups draw heavily on the philosophies and doctrines of Black nationalist organizations such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers as well as individual political and religious figures such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nat Turner, and Marcus Garvey. The most notable of these, Public Enemy (whose early audiences, ironically, were largely White), gained worldwide popularity with their hit single, “Terrordome.” The rap, which denounces drug dealers, the activities of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), soap operas, and army recruitment tactics, heaps praises on the Black Panthers, the Black Muslims, and jazz saxophonist John Coltrane. Public Enemy is credited with stirring up most of the Afrocentrism debate in rap circles. Their raps are consistently aimed at casting light on racial injustices against Blacks and educating their listeners about these injustices. Two of the group’s albums have gone platinum including such titles as “It takes A Nation,” “Bring the Noise,” “Rebel Without a Pause,” “Don’t Believe the Hype,” “Do the Right Thing,” and “Fight the Power.”

Public Enemy hails from Hempstead, Long Island (NY), and consists of leader Chuck D (Carlton Ridenhour), Flavor-Flave (William Drayton), and Terminator X (disc jockey Norman Rogers). Recently, “Security of the First World,” the group’s onstage bodyguards, came under fire because of comments made by Professor Griff (“Minister of Information” of the security force). In a 1989 interview Professor Griff allegedly stated: “The Jews are wicked. And we can prove this.” As the reporter further claimed, Griff also held that “the majority of Jews are responsible for the majority of the wickedness that goes on across the globe” (Pareles, 1989, p. C-19). Almost instantaneously, rabbis and other leaders of Jewish groups brought pressure on the rap group in numerous press conferences and on radio and television talk shows. The Jewish Defense Organization (JDO) announced a boycott of Public Enemy. They also sent a group of protestors armed with baseball bats and chains to the group’s management offices (fortunately, they had the wrong address). The

5The Nation of Islam is generally acknowledged as having a deep influence on rap music. Rappers such as Poor Righteous Teachers, King Sun, Brand Nubian, Movement Ex, and Public Enemy, frequently quote and draw inspiration from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad (founder of the Nation of Islam), Malcolm X, and Minister Louis Farrakhan. The famed boxer, Muhammad Ali, was also an early rapper.
JDO and other Jewish organizations bombarded record companies and retailers with fliers of Griff's remarks. Numerous articles were written referring to Public Enemy as "bigots," "anti-Semitic," and "racist." Mira Boland of the Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'rith stated that Professor Griff's "nasty slurs reflect the kind of bigotry we've come to expect from [Black Muslim minister] Louis Farrakhan and company. ... given the popularity of rap music today, it's hard to think of a more insidious influence on the minds of young people" (Harrington, 1989).

Griff insisted that his words had been taken out of context by the reporter. Members of Public Enemy protested that the media "played up to the sensitive Jewish angle just to make a story." They also insisted they had no time to "get hung up" on the Jewish issue; rather, they claimed: "We're constantly battling to try to regain a Black consciousness for our people. ... Jews are not the only target of Professor Griff's harsh words. He aims some of his toughest insults at middle-class Blacks" (Harrington, 1989). Nonetheless, Chuck D soon fired Professor Griff, stating: "The real enemy is the system, not a people. ... We aren't anti-Jewish, we aren't anti-anybody. We're pro-Black, pro-Black culture and pro-human race. ... Professor Griff's responsibility as Minister of Information was to faithfully transmit those values to everybody, not to sabotage them" (Pareles, 1989). Professor Griff was later reinstated as "community liaison, but essentially muzzled"; many felt this muzzling was due to pressure from the Black community. The group broke up shortly thereafter (Zimmerman, 1989), but it has since been reorganized minus Professor Griff.

**Rap in Transition**

What began as a form of Black urban music performed primarily by Black men is no longer exclusively Black or male anymore. When rap music first appeared women merely stood by the stage or performed on stage dancing and cheering the men on. According to Toop (1984, p. 6), however: "On all of the early rap records featuring women, the women rap as well as the men and in some cases far better." Although rap music was long a medium dominated by Black artists, some White rap acts have recently managed to top the rap charts. Indeed, it seems that everybody's rapping these days: the "Flintstones" cartoon characters rap in commercials for children's vitamins and cereals; McDonald's hamburgers, Pillsbury, and Coca-Cola commercials also feature rapping. Several National Football League teams have created rap videos and donated the money from video sales to charity. Rap has been successfully meshed with several genres from rock, pop, and house music to jazz and gospel.

**Women in Rap**

In rap music today, females have moved from being topics to performers. The opportunity for female rappers began in 1985. Mercedes Ladies and the Zulu Queens were among the early female rappers, but they never made a recording. The first females to make rap records were Sha-Rock of the Funky Four Plus One More and Dimples D (DiPrima, 1990). Female rappers who currently challenge the most macho of the male
rappers include Antonnette, Icy Jay, Nikki Dee, M. C. Lyte, The Real Roxanne, Monie Love, Roxanne Shante’, Oaktown’s 3.5.7., J. J. Fad, Tairrie B, Ice Cream Tee, Cashmere, M. C. Light, Ms. Melody, Shelly Thunder, Silk Tymes Leather, Queen Latifah, and the group Salt-n-Pepa. Unlike male rappers, most female rappers do not dwell on their sexual skills or fling themselves at the center of violent escapades. Rather, the women of rap strive to best their musical competitors with colorful boasts, sly humor, and good-natured put-downs.

Although female rappers were a presence from the beginning of rap, the first to get serious airplay were the group Salt-n-Pepa. Salt (Cheryl James), Pepa (Sandy Denton), and DJ Spinderella (Deidre Roper; added after the duo’s second hit) consider themselves feminist rappers. James and Denton met while both were working as department store telephone salespersons in New York City. There a coworker persuaded them to help create a song for a class he was taking; they recorded the song for a small record company and it sold more than 250,000 copies. Their first 12-inch dance single, “Hot, Cool & Vicious” (with the hit, “Push It,” on Side B), sold a million copies. Salt-n-Pepa’s rap blends sex appeal with a definite level of feminist-minded independence. With the outstanding success of their debut album, “Black’s Magic” (1990), these savvy young women have begun to produce their own works. As Salt contends, she would like to see women less dependent on men: “Women have brains and I hate to see them waste their lives walking in the shadow of a man” (Small, 1988, p. 544).

One female rapper doing battle in the rap arena despite an Arabic name that means “delicate and sensitive” is Queen Latifah. Born Dana Owens and hailing from New Jersey, Queen Latifah started rapping when she was just 16 years old. Her music stands out because she combines rapping and singing talents and borrows from hip-hop, house music, jazz, and reggae. She has been referred to as the “Aretha Franklin of rap” (Duncan, 1989, p. 14). Queen Latifah has had some success on the rap charts with hit singles “Ladies First,” “Come Into My House,” and “All Hail the Queen.” In addition, she rapped on British pop star David Bowie’s remix of “Fame.” With her dancers, the Safari Sisters, Queen Latifah’s act demonstrates that she takes rap seriously. Stressing that image is important and posing questions of Afrocentricity and conscience, she sees her art form as a way of communicating positive ideas. In her view, rap is “a creative outlet . . . and sometimes it can become like a newspaper that people read with their ears” (Duncan, 1989, p. 14). Although she claims that she is not a feminist and that she does not aim solely at a female market, the Queen’s work and style belie her words. When most male rappers talk about females, she contends, it is usually “exaggerated for the humor” and about “women who use their bodies, not their minds.” For her own videos, she counters, she chooses female dancers that young people can respect. To her, many of the female dancers who appear on male rappers’ videos “look like skeezers (tramps)”: “A lot of those females don’t have respect for themselves; they only think materialistically. Guys are exploiting them” (Ehrlich, 1990).
Another dominant voice among the female rappers is M. C. Lyte (Lana Morer). Also a strident feminist, M. C. Lyte contends that if females did not buy the records or attend the concerts of male rappers who demean women, the men would change their lyrics. M. C. Lyte’s First Priority/Atlantic record label debut, the single, “Lyte As A Rock,” sold 75,000 copies in less than a month with virtually no airplay. However, this performer’s entrance into the music business was fairly easy: her father is the head of First Priority records and her brothers are also rappers and rap music producers (Kennedy, 1990).

**White Rappers**

Generally, Black rap artists express surprise at seeing White rappers make their way up the R & B singles and album charts. Others express anger, “seeing Business as Usual stamped all over it. White mimicry. A pale copy of the real thing” (Brown, 1991, p. 12). While Black rappers feel they rap from their life experiences, they view White rappers as merely copying Black style. Among the White rap acts to emerge in recent years are the Young Black Teenagers, the Beastie Boys, 3rd Bass, Vanilla Ice, and platinum-blond Tairrie B (one of rap’s outspoken female lyricists). Unlike most of the Black rappers, who come from families of low or moderate incomes, many White rappers come from more privileged backgrounds.

The first White rap group to capture rap’s boastful quality was the New York trio consisting of MCA (Adam Yauch), Mike D (Michael Diamond), and King Ad-Rock (Adam Horovitz Yauch) and known as the Beastie Boys. The Beastie Boys entered the music scene performing in a hard-core rock-and-roll band, but by 1983 they had moved on to rap. Their lyrics, which echo with profanity, primarily discuss sex and violence. The group’s debut album sold 720,000 copies in six weeks, and reached the Number 7 position on Billboard’s pop chart and the Number 3 spot on its then-Black music list (Russell, 1987; DeCurtis, 1987).

A young man who has been accused of flagrantly plagiarizing the Black sound is White rapper Vanilla Ice (Robby Van Winkle) from Miami (FL). Although Van Winkle’s rap is sexually explicit, he prides himself on not utilizing profanity in his lyrics. Critics assert that Vanilla Ice is collaborating with the White-controlled music establishment and ruthlessly “ripping off” (stealing) Black music (Brown, 1991). Black rap artists, they claim, see him as “softening rap’s raw, rough edges, making it soft and bland and safe enough for mass market consumption but weak, without staying power” (Murphy, 1990). Before he became the opening act for rapper M. C. Hammer, Vanilla Ice was unheard of. With his debut album, “To the Extreme” (which sold seven million copies in five weeks), the White rapper knocked M. C. Hammer out of a 21-week streak as Number 1 on the R & B album charts. Vanilla Ice’s single, “Ice Ice Baby,” became the first rap song ever to reach Number 1 on the Hot One Hundred singles list, thus leading other music industry analysts to proclaim him rap’s rising star and the idol of the current generation of White teenage girls. Vanilla Ice is indeed responsible for attracting a new audience to rap music, but he has been critical of other rappers. He
has called M. C. Hammer’s music “senseless and commercial,” while extolling his own rap for “telling a story from start to finish.” Van Winkle’s own story is somewhat vague, however. Although he contends that his affinity for rap springs from “hanging out” with Black teenagers in his youth (he claims he went to school with Luther Campbell of 2 Live Crew), his accounts of his personal history have been inconsistent and the truth of his background has proven difficult to corroborate (Murphy, 1990).

Christian Rap

Christian rap, popular with both Black and White audiences, first surfaced nationally in the mid-1980s with such recording artists as Stephen Wiley, the first Christian rapper to be signed to a major label. The popular Black gospel group The Winans, winners of four Grammies (music industry awards), have also issued a popular dance single, “It’s Time,” that blends rap with gospel. Several other gospel groups have made recordings. These include Rap DC Talk and Transformation Crusade. Both groups originated at the Reverend Jerry Falwell’s Liberty Baptist University in Lynchburg (VA). Transformation Crusade has released two gospel rap recordings that have reached the top-50 lists of contemporary Christian music. According to a group member: “We’re not like other rappers, rapping for ourselves. We’re rapping for God and no one else. It’s not just entertainment, it’s ministry. We want to see sinners saved and saints released” (“Gospel with Beat,” 1990, p. B-6).

Business as Usual

As rap’s popularity has increased so have its negative connotations. Some critics allege that rap music “promotes violence and that rappers present negative images” (Henderson, 1988). In a 1988 issue of Billboard magazine Harrison presented the findings from his interviews with a number of rappers. He asked a range of rap artists, from those at the top of the charts to those new on the scene, to pinpoint the sources of the most opposition to and misunderstanding about rap music. Eighty percent of the artists surveyed offered their explanations, claiming that resistance to rap comes from (1) the Black bourgeoisie who own Black radio, (2) a misinformed news media, and (3) rappers who abuse the language by using excessive profanity. While the rappers noted that the Black community as a whole is very supportive, they faulted popular Black-audience publications such as Ebony and Jet magazines for failing to support rap artists, claiming that White-owned publications such as Rolling Stone and Spin have been more responsive. However, an equal number of rappers who participated in the Billboard survey indicated that they did not view the negative propaganda about rap as a racial issue but instead saw it as prejudice against a new form of music that the public does not yet fully understand.

Sampling Disputes

More often than not, rap recordings utilize music that is electronically lifted, or “sampled,” from the previously recorded music of artists who
were popular during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; these samples are inserted ("dubbed") into the new compositions as background music or musical bridges. Bits and pieces of the music of artists such as James Brown, Rick James, Led Zeppelin, Sly Stone, and Curtis Mayfield are frequently sampled into contemporary rap recordings. Segments of recorded speeches by Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Minister Louis Farrakhan are also commonly used.

Due to the low cost of sampling equipment, many rap groups find that including a "hook" (a catchy musical phrase) from an older successful song is much easier than writing and recording their own. However, when use of sampled music is not cleared with the songwriter or owner of the music's copyright, sampling infringes against existing copyright law. Critics in the music publishing business argue that laziness or the inability to compose their own songs leads rappers to use other people's music; thus the record industry has been forced to step up its enforcement of copyright laws. A number of lawsuits have been filed—indeed, thousands of rappers may be illegally sampling copyrighted material—but few if any have gone all the way through the legal system. As one entertainment lawyer states, going to trial would fail to benefit either the sampler or the sampler owner:

The user of samples would prefer not to risk a case that would either increase the cost (to license samples) or make some uses impossible. On the other side, the owners of the material sampled, publishers and record companies, know the copyright law as it is written contains the right to make certain uses without paying, which is called fair use. (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 69)

Lawyers maintain that samplers can avoid lawsuits by applying for licenses to use songs or bits of songs in their raps. Some entertainment law firms have even gone so far as to offer their rap clients compact disk "libraries" of music that can be lawfully used and manipulated without fears of legal problems.

**Distribution Difficulties**

From day one the independent labels (indies) have been the lifeblood of rap music. Free from the influence or control of the major record labels the indies created and discovered new rap talent and created the market for rap by word of mouth and street-level promotion tactics, personally urging retail record stores and video outlets to carry their artists' products (Mapp, 1989). Some of the well-known indies of rap are: Cardiac Records, Delicious Vinyl, Luke Records, Nastymix, Next Plateau, First Priority, Profile, Select, Tommy Boy, Tuff City, Wild Pitch, Def Jam, Egyptian Empire, Ruthless, Original Sound Equipment, Orpheus, and Sleeping Bag/Fresh Records. Additionally, rappers M. C. Hammer and Luther Campbell have established their own independent production companies and labels. However, because the music business is such a risky one, many of rap's indies have since fallen by the wayside (Mapp, 1989).

Most of the indies began with limited resources and zero credibility. To survive, they had to have enough capital to function until their artists' music was in demand by the public. They had to work hard and fast. With the rapid pace of rap's development, speedy release of a recording
was crucial. Then, the product had to reach the consumer. The indies and their record distributors had to negotiate with the buyers (pointers) at the various record retail outlets to place their artists’ recording in the marketplace. With hundreds of indies and major labels competing for limited shelf space and visibility in the volatile business of music sales, distribution becomes a very important component of the operation.

In the early days of rap music it was simpler for the indies to reach rap shoppers because the market for the music was small. However, without a track record an indy had no choice but to distribute through a private distribution company. Many indies experienced difficulties in receiving wide distribution, promotion (if any), and prompt payment from music retailers. Consequently many of the former indies now have distribution contracts with such major labels ("majors") as CBS, Warner Brothers, RCA, MCA, and Atlantic; others are now wholly owned by the major record companies. In such arrangements the indy and the major jointly design the marketing of the rap artist. The indy provides the knowledge of the methods for reaching the rap consumer, and the major supplies a sophisticated approach to promotion and distribution (Donloe, 1990).

Representatives of those indies that have remained independent of the majors have expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of rap that the majors are placing on the market. Independent producers complain that because of rap’s lower bottom-line figures, the majors are playing rap cheap. The cost to the majors to develop a new rap artist has been estimated at an average of $65,000 and upward, whereas the development of a new R & B act costs about $300,000 (Sacks, 1989, p. R-3). Russell Simmons, co-owner of independent Def Jam Records, asserts that the majors are buying up indies for the "market share and not for the music," and that the rap market has thus been oversaturated with poor-quality rap. Simmons, the brother of Run of Run-DMC, teamed up with rapper Kurtis Blow (Curtis Walker) while a sociology major at City College in Harlem and became his manager. Blow went on to become the first big solo rap personality in 1979. Since then Simmons has managed many of rap’s major artists such as Run DMC, Public Enemy, LL Cool J, and White groups the Beastie Boys and 3rd Bass (Holden, 1987). Despite his impressive track record, however, Simmons claims that "in six months every major has put out more rap than I have in six years" (Sacks, 1989).

Indy representatives also concur that if independently produced rap could get more radio airplay their product would move faster. They note that although Black-owned radio has opened slightly to crossover rap, most Black stations are unwilling to accept hard-core rap music and relegate the playing of most rap to the evening and late night hours. With regard to television, Debbie Bennett of Luke Records, another independent rap production company, maintains that "Music Television (MTV) has been more supportive than Black Entertainment Television (BET)" (Blatt, 1990, p. R-8).

**CONCLUSION**

Many young people, especially those Black youth from families of low or moderate incomes in the nation’s inner cities, cease to identify
with the school environment and drop out as they reach the teen years. Rap music, the street, and the peer group are often viewed by youth as viable alternatives to formal schooling. Whereas the peer group and the values and attitudes projected therein has been shown to exert a strong influence on youth, this influence often runs counter to the goals and expectations of formal education. Yet, for some young people, interest in the rap music industry has stimulated their entrepreneurial tendencies and provided them with an escape from the city streets.

Rather than simply discounting rap as a corrupted form of cheap culture, it should be recognized that, for better or worse, rap is an educational medium capable of affecting the values and attitudes of many of our young people. Rap’s emergence has facilitated the rise of many creative young African Americans, some of whom are keenly aware of the educational potential of this unique musical form and of the influence they, as rap artists, exert on today’s young people. Some public school teachers have determined that rap is an effective teaching tool when used to enhance the self-esteem of Black youngsters. One such teacher is Ayana (nee Carolyn Plummer) of Oakland (CA). She has prepared her own video and also has a television rap show, called “Guess What, Ayana? All Young Artists Need Attention,” on local educational station KDOL (Channel 13). The show is aimed at children of all ethnic groups in the Oakland area. Psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing is a consultant to the program. Ayana states that the goal of “Guess What, Ayana?” is to help these youth become self-empowered and to teach them to like themselves (Kashif, 1983).

Like the blues, rhythm-and-blues, and jazz in their beginnings, rap has been applauded by few, rejected by many, and subjected to exploitation by record companies, managers, producers, and club owners alike. Like its kin it may also prove to have similar staying power. Many rap artists have entered the arena, many achieving success but many disappearing like the wind. They used whatever was cheap and available—from old records to used turntables—and flavored it with a unique and vibrant style of talking to produce an innovative, political, danceable musical form. Despite their lack of access to more sophisticated equipment and promotional and artistic outlets, rappers and their DJs have undoubtedly created their own sound. As educationalists we cannot afford not to tap into some of rap’s vitality and bring it into the educational setting where it can inspire and motivate our youth to stay in school and receive relevant educations.

REFERENCES