

Composition Essay Contest

The English Department at Western Kentucky University is pleased to announce the 2023-2024 Composition Essay Contest. Students should visit [here](#) to complete an application and submit a 500-750-word essay (MLA style; pdf format) based on the prompt below. The English Department will invite finalists, their teachers, and family to campus for a reception and ceremony on April 20th where they will be recognized. The winners will receive cash prizes: First Place: \$150; Second Place: \$100; Third Place: \$50.

Application and Essays are due March 23, 2024.

Prompt: As *NY Times* cultural critic Jon Caramanica recently writes, hip-hop is not solely an art form, but “is woven into television and film, fashion, advertising, literature, politics and countless other corners of American life. It is lingua franca, impossible to avoid.” If hip-hop is indeed a lingua franca, however, that doesn’t mean that it is spoken the same way by everyone, nor does it mean we all have the same relationship to it. Like anything else in the world of culture, hip-hop lives in us in a wide range of expressions – and certainly in some of us more than others.

For this year’s essay contest, you are invited to place yourself in conversation with a few prominent cultural critics in thinking about what hip-hop’s past, present, and future might mean for us. In an original essay of around 750 words, please explore what these essayists are saying about hip-hop, but also discuss how (and to what degree) hip-hop is meaningful to you in your own lived reality.

To do so, please place yourself in conversation with at least two of the sources and incorporate them into a coherent, well-developed essay that reflects on hip-hop in the light of its 50th anniversary. Additionally, please specifically discuss at least one hip-hop song of your choosing that helps you demonstrate your points and make your case. Although there is a personal element at work here, please center your essay on an argument, and use the sources to develop your ideas in the context of what others are saying on this issue. Avoid merely summarizing the sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from whether through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You may cite the sources by using the author’s last names in parentheses below.

Source A: “How Do You Tell the Story of 50 Years of Hip Hop?” (Caramanica)

Source B: “The Future of Rap is Female (Orr)

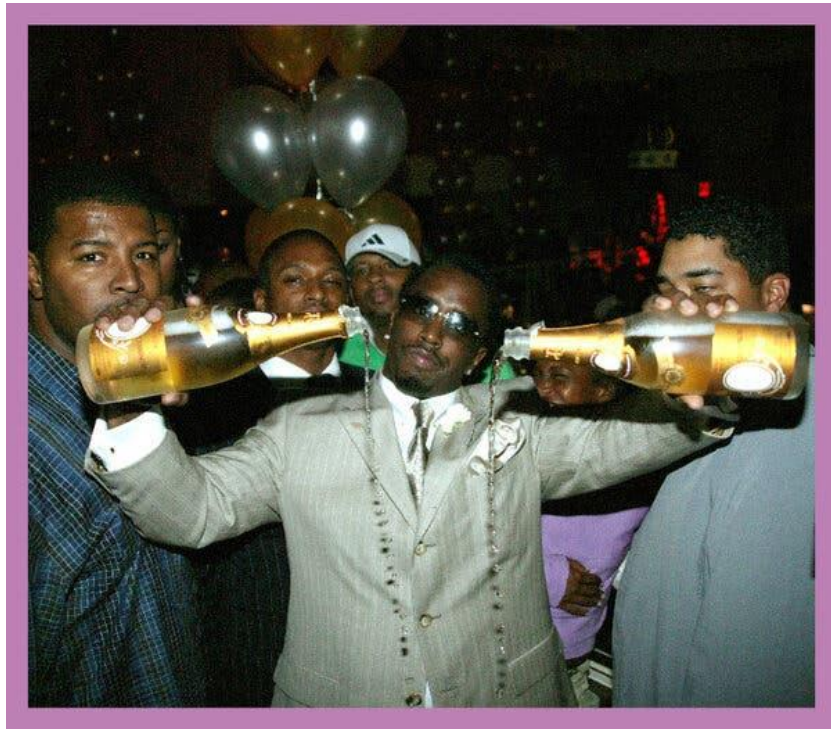
Source C “How Hip Hop Conquered the World” (Morris)

How Do You Tell the Story of 50 Years of Hip-Hop?

Hip-hop is a fount of constant innovation woven into nearly every corner of American life. So don't look for cohesion: Lean into the cacophony.

By [Jon Caramanica](#)

Published July 18, 2023 Updated Aug. 2, 2023



Sean "Puffy" Combs in a celebratory mood. In the mid-1990s, labels like Bad Boy helped bring rap to the center of American culture. Credit...Johnny Nunez/WireImage, via Getty Images

Hip-hop is a wondrous and centerless tangle, ubiquitous even if not always totally visible.

It is a fount of constant innovation, and a historical text ripe for pilfering. It is a continuation of rock, soul and jazz traditions, while also explicitly loosening their cultural grip. It is evolving more rapidly than ever — new styles emerge yearly, or faster, multiplying the genre's potential. And it has impact far beyond music: Hip-hop is woven into television and film, fashion, advertising, literature, politics and countless other corners of American life. It is lingua franca, impossible to avoid.

It is far too vast to be contained under one tent, or limited to one narrative. The genre is gargantuan, nonlinear and unruly. It has its own internal quarrels and misunderstandings, and its stakeholders are sometimes friends and collaborators, and sometimes view each other warily.

So when trying to catalog hip-hop in full, it's only reasonable to lean into the cacophony. The package that accompanies this essay does just that, collecting oral histories from 50

genre titans of the past five-plus decades. The number matters. It's an acknowledgment that at 50 years old — a mild fiction, but more on that later — hip-hop is broad and fruitful, enthralling and polyglot, the source of an endless fount of narratives. Its fullness cannot be captured without sprawl and ambition. Many voices need to be heard, and they won't always agree.

Side by side, there are stylistic innovators, crossover superstars, regional heroes, micromarket celebrities. There are those who insist on their primacy and see themselves as a center of gravity, and those who are proud students of the game and understand their place in hip-hop's broader artistic arc. There are those who are universally recognized, and those known mainly by connoisseurs. There are agitators and accommodationists. The revered and the maligned. Some even play with the boundaries of what rapping is ordinarily considered to be.

All taken together, these artists form a family tree of the genre, one that highlights bridges between groups that are typically discussed separately, and that underscores the ways in which rappers — no matter the city they hail from, or the era in which they found their success — have been grappling with similar circumstances, creative questions and obstacles.



The Cold Crush Brothers in the Bronx, 1979. Credit...Joe Conzo, via Easy A.D.

These 50 histories detail hip-hop from countless vantage points: the past forward, and vice versa; the underground upward; the less populated regions outward; the big cities out into the suburbs. They tell the story of a makeshift musical movement that laid the foundation for the defining cultural shift of the past few decades.

Fifty years ago, though, that outcome seemed fanciful at best. In the 1970s, Bronx block parties gave way to nightclubs, and talking D.J.s laid the foundation for dedicated M.C.s to begin taking over. Soon, the intrusion of capitalism removed and packaged the part of these live events that was the easiest to transmit: rapping.

Then it was off to the races. By the mid-1980s, the hip-hop industry was a small club but big business, as audiences around the country were primed by the commercial release of recordings from countless New York artists. A wave of soon-to-be-global stars arrived: Run-DMC, LL Cool J, the Beastie Boys. Hip-hop became worldwide counterculture.

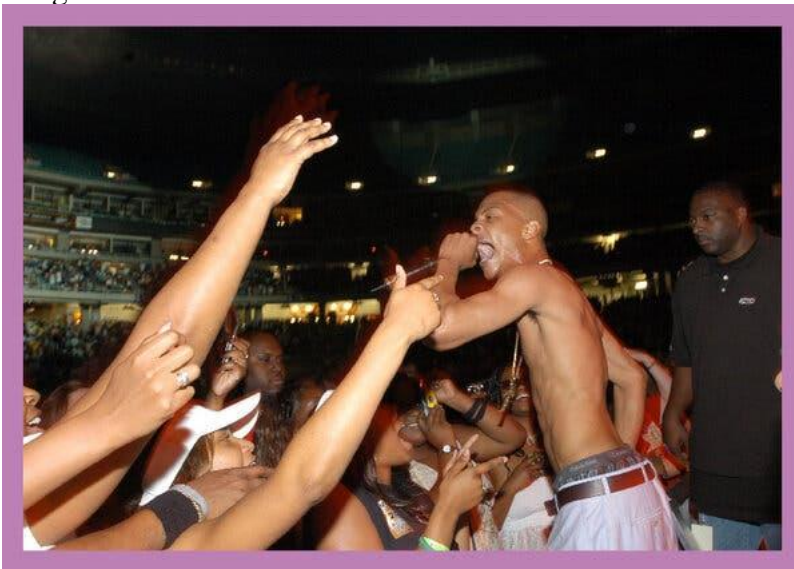


Run-DMC in 1985, onstage in Providence, R.I. Credit...John Nordell/Getty Images

By the dawn of the 1990s, it flowered everywhere in this country — the South, the West, the Midwest — and seeped into the global mainstream. In the mid-90s, thanks to the work of Biggie Smalls and Puffy, Tupac Shakur and Dr. Dre, Bad Boy and Death Row, it became the center of American pop music, despite resistance from those convinced rock was destined to forever reign supreme.

Into the 2000s, the genre's power center shifted from the coasts to the South, where the genre was flourishing (largely away from the scrutiny of the major labels) in Miami, Houston, Virginia, Atlanta and Memphis. 2 Live Crew, the Geto Boys, Missy Elliott, Outkast, Three 6 Mafia — each had absorbed what was being imported from the rest of the country and created new lingo and sonic frameworks around it. Hip-hop was becoming a widely shared language with numerous dialects.

Image



T.I. onstage in his hometown, Atlanta, in 2005. Credit...Ray Tamarra/Getty Images

All the while, the genre was expanding, becoming more commercially successful and inescapable with each year. It became centrist pop, which in turn spun off its own dissidents: the New York and Los Angeles undergrounds of the 1990s; the progressive indie scenes of the 2000s; and the SoundCloud rap of the 2010s. In the past 20 years, hip-hop has been responsible not only for some of the biggest pop music of the era — Drake, Kanye West, Jay-Z, Cardi B — but its templates have become open source for performers in other genres to borrow from, which they did, and do, widely. Hip-hop became a crucial touch point for country music, for reggaeton, for hard rock, for K-pop and much more.

What's striking in the histories collected in this package is how no part of that ascent has been taken for granted. In every era, there were stumbling blocks. For each artist, there was a promise of a scene just out of reach. And for all of these rappers, that meant leaning in to a new idea of what their version of hip-hop could be, and hoping ears would meet them in this untested place.

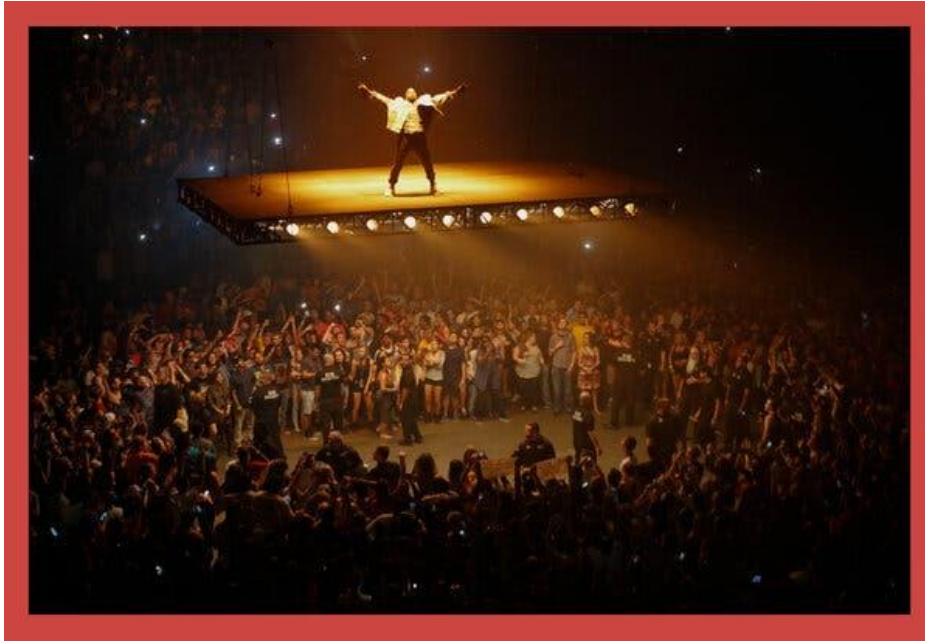


Missy Elliott performing in New York in 2012. Credit...Jerritt Clark/FilmMagic, via Getty Images

There is also the matter of untold history — to read these recollections is to be continually reminded of those who are no longer here to share their tales. There is a punishing catalog of before-their-time deaths just below these stories, a reminder that canons can't include songs that never got to be made.

As for the 50th anniversary, well, it is a framing of convenience. The date refers to Aug. 11, 1973, when DJ Kool Herc — in the rec room of the apartment building at 1520 Sedgwick Ave. in the Bronx — reportedly first mixed two copies of the same album into one seamless breakbeat. That is, of course, one way to think about hip-hop's big-bang moment, but by no means the only one. If you think of rapping as toasting, or talking over prerecorded music, or speaking in rhythmic form, then hip-hop has been around longer than 50 years. Just ask the Last Poets, or DJ Hollywood, who would improvise

rhymes on the microphone as he was spinning disco records. There are also, depending upon whom you ask, others who had previously mixed two of the same record.



Kanye West's Saint Pablo tour opener in Indianapolis in 2016. Credit...AJ Mast for The New York Times

But the canniness and the cynicism of attempting to enshrine a date that everyone can stand behind reflects a darker and more worrisome truth, which is that, for decades, hip-hop was perceived as disposable, a nuisance, an aberration. Commemoration and enshrinement seemed far-fetched. For a long time, hip-hop had to argue for its rightful place in pop music, and pop culture, facing hostilities that were racial, legal, musical and beyond.

Insisting that the genre has an origin point, therefore, is really just another way of insisting on its importance, its stability and its future. You can quarrel with the specific details — and many do — but not with the intent, which is to ensure that no one again overlooks the genre's power and influence.

That said, hip-hop was never going anywhere, because no style of pop music has been as adaptive and as sly. Hip-hop directly answers its critics, and it voraciously consumes and reframes its antecedents. It is restless and immediate, sometimes changing so quickly that it doesn't stop to document itself. So here is a landing place to reflect, and a jumping off point for the next 50 or so years.

[Jon Caramanica](#) is a pop music critic for The Times and the host of the "[Popcast](#)" podcast. He also writes the men's [Critical Shopper](#) column for Styles. He previously worked for Vibe magazine, and has written for the Village Voice, Spin, XXL and more. [More about Jon Caramanica](#)

THE FUTURE OF RAP



IS FEMALE

As their male counterparts turn depressive and paranoid, it's the women who are having all the fun.

By Niela Orr Photographs by Adrienne Raquel Aug. 9, 2023

Like American men in general, our top male rappers appear to be in crisis: overwhelmed, confused, struggling to embody so many contradictory ideals. As a result, the art is suffering, too. If the music were any more existentially morose, or stylistically comatose, mainstream hip-hop made by men might be headed the way of hair metal or disco. The narcotized indolence is everywhere; the recounting of opioid abuse is so blasé (the Percs, Xans and Oxys) that these pillbox litanies leave you wondering if the Sackler family sponsored a wing in the rap museum. And then there's the sense of foreshortened future that's baked into the genre but has been amplified as gangsta rap branched off into trap, drill and other grittier subgenres. Many of the male rappers are documenting social strife and commenting on the violence that comes with being young, Black, famous men. This thread can be moving and also heartbreaking. When listening to these songs, it is impossible to not ache for their makers, to be afraid right along with them. But the music bears the weight of all that anxiety and grief. Even the occasional Drake smash is not enough to disturb the disquiet.

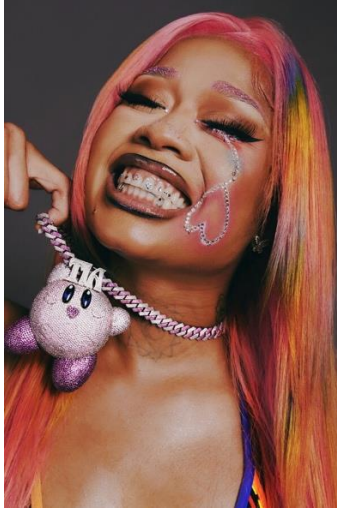
Take a look at the aesthetic, and macho rap has painted itself into the corners you would find in the restaurants of Mafia movies, where honchos sit facing the door. It's as if every uber-masculine hit record could score the last half-hour of "Goodfellas," a keyed-up sequence that ends with the protagonist in police custody. This paranoia has even found its way into the production: Listen to any trending song on the radio, YouTube or a streaming playlist, and it feels as if gunshots are hip-hop's most frequently used Foley effect. Many men in rap have a target on their back, so they have

every right to be defensive: They witness their families and bandmates dying, their peers faltering. They know the government can use their lyrics against them in court. You get the sense that the music is simultaneously bulletproof and already on life support.

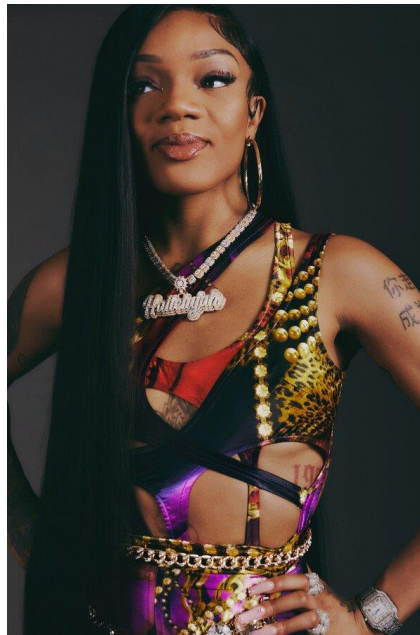
**Top photo:
CITY GIRLS**

JT and Yung Miami, a duo known as the City Girls, were among the rappers the magazine photographed at the Rolling Loud festival in Miami last month.

TIACORINE



GLORILLA



Something elemental seems to have been lost. Black music, from blues to jazz to proto-rock 'n' roll to soul to early hip-hop, has consistently been distinguished by its sense of humor, by its playfulness. Just as joy is an important survival mechanism for oppressed people, it's essential for the sustainability of any popular art form. Rap has gone through different periods in which the fun ebbs and flows, but the serious acts and the free spirits were always in balance: the Fat Boys and

P.M. Dawn alongside Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions, A Tribe Called Quest and the Wu-Tang Clan, Da Brat and the Conscious Daughters. Before Tupac Shakur became a martyr, he was once a member of Digital Underground, wore elaborate costumes and did the Humpty dance.

There's still plenty of levity to be found, in countless regional and indie scenes that don't figure into radio airplay or Spotify playlists, but mostly you find it on the other side of the gender divide. And it feels as if there are more women rapping than ever before. There are, of course, the household names, who all incorporate some degree of sex-positivity, playfulness and exuberance into their music: Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, Doja Cat, the City Girls. But there's also a class of upstarts: There's Coi Leray, whose hit "Players" reached No.9 on the Billboard Hot 100. There's Latto, who recently scored her first Billboard No.1 hit in late July, for "Seven," a duet with the K-pop star Jung Kook. Three of Ice Spice's singles released this year have peaked in the Top 10: "Barbie World," "Princess Diana" and "Boy's a Liar, Pt. 2."

Not only is this music popular and crafty, but it has vitality and comedy in spades. Listen to the opening of Sexy Red's "Pound Town," the lyrics of which are too explicit to print here but involve a colorful description of her groin area. Eat up the excellent comedic timing of Ice Spice on the chorus of her viral hit "Munch (Feelin' U)," on which she sounds like a sped-up Rodney Dangerfield delivering one-liners: "You thought I was feeling you?/That [expletive] a munch/[Expletive] a eater, he ate it for lunch/Bitch I'm a baddie I get what I want." On the chorus of GloRilla's "F.N.F. (Let's Go)," the Memphis spitter spells out her romantic situation for the listener in a lively language spree: "And I'm S-I-N-G-L-E again/Outside hanging out the window with my ratchet-ass friends."

MAIYA THE DON

"We're making the people move. Men forget that women like them. You know? Everybody wanna talk about *gang, gang, gang*. Women like you, hello? Take a moment to be sexy! Hello? Take your shirt off! The boys is forgetting to take their shirts off, but the girlies never forget."



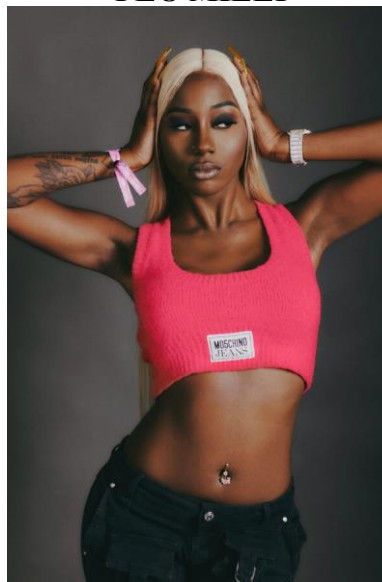
There is currently a panoply of women, unattached and free, making music that they want to listen to — and finding that the appeal crosses gender lines. Last month, none other than Lil Baby, one of

the best-selling and most-acclaimed rappers of this generation, put it plainly to the website Complex: “Females,” he said, are, “like, running the game right now.” One of these women is Flo Milli, whose “uplifting, confident, bad-bitch music” — her words — made her a star. When I asked her if she had any thoughts about the resurgence of interest in women’s hip-hop, she told me: “Girls are just blowing up now, because we’re putting more energy into the bars. We’re not on that killing [expletive] that they used to be so obsessed about. At the end of the day, nobody’s trying to be living like that forever.”

She adjusted her hair and divulged her theory of what separates the men and the women. “They got it easy — all they gotta do is get a haircut and a chain, they good,” Flo Milli said. “We gotta spend way more bread, put way more energy into our performance, hire dancers, just put a lot more into everything than they do.” It was like that old line about Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire — she did everything he did “backward and in high heels” — only in this case you could add a kaleidoscopically colored diamond-and-platinum chain to the outfit. Oh, and a custom-made costume. Plus a delicately drawn face full of makeup. And a killer gel manicure.

From the beginning, in the 1970s, female rappers were right alongside the men, making convivial club and party music to soothe and stir Black and brown communities: Debbie D, Lisa Lee, Sha-Rock, Mercedes Ladies, the Sequence. In the mid-’80s, the dynamics shifted slightly, when UTFO released “Roxanne, Roxanne,” a comical torch song dissing a woman who rejected the men’s advances. As legend has it, they were supposed to make an appearance on a radio show, and when they canceled, a 14-year-old girl named Lolita Shanté Gooden went to the radio station and offered to make a response track. The song was called “Roxanne’s Revenge” and was full of jokey barbs about the group, with Gooden playing the role of the fictional Roxanne: “You gotta be cute and you tryin’ to be fly/But all you wanna be is Roxanne’s guy/Because I turned you down, without a frown/Embarrassed you in front of your friends, made you look like a clown.”

FLO MILLI



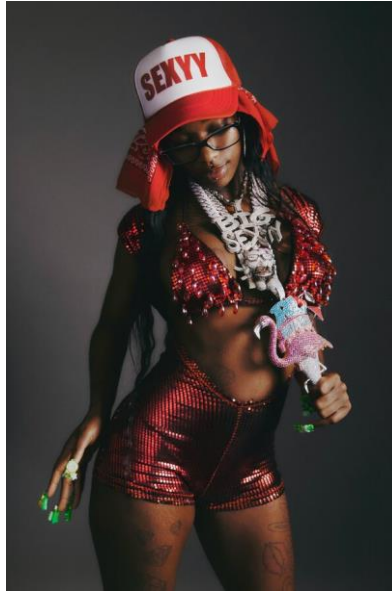
BK THERULA



GLOSS UP



SEXY RED



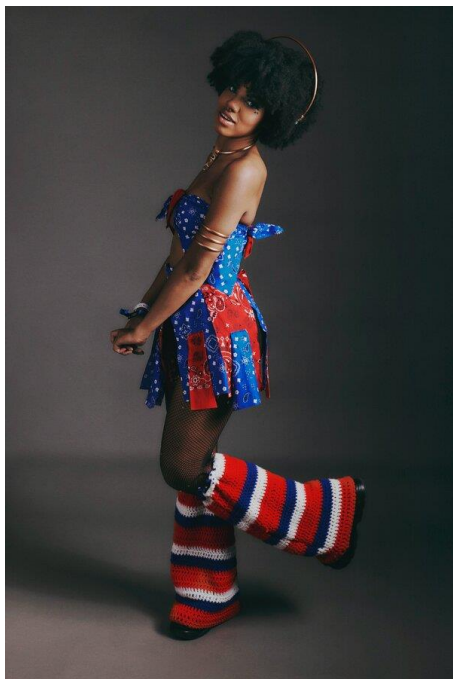
The track became a surprise hit, and Gooden came to be known as Roxanne Shanté. As Clover Hope writes in "The Motherlode: 100+ Women Who Made Hip-Hop," the song sparked a phenomenon, inspiring "a legendary wave of response records." By some estimates, more than 100 songs were released, with a range of rappers playing characters mentioned in the initial back-and-forth (Roxanne's parents and siblings, etc.). Those inventive rivalries became known as the Roxanne Wars, which some consider to be the first recorded beef in rap history. In fact, two of the biggest female acts of the 1980s, M.C. Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa, were drawn into the business to capitalize on the popularity of the phenomenon.

The gimmicky "response record" trend created a groove into which female rappers fit for a long time. In the "mob wife" era, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, when hip-hop's male headliners were obsessed with crime flicks like "The Godfather," "Scarface" and "Casino," they fashioned themselves into rap mafiosos, and the women signed to their labels were styled to look like gangster's molls. And, like accessories after the fact, those women acted the part. The response records continued ("No Scrubs" versus "No Pigeons"; "My Neck, My Back (Lick It)" versus Too Short's unprintably titled retort), as did rap's battle-of-the-sexes duets ("Get Money," "Crush on You," "Chickenhead," "Can I Get A ..."). On wax, gender conflict was made into entertainment, but real-life disparities persisted. In an interview with the music journalist Brian Coleman, M.C. Lyte, the pioneering Brooklyn rapper of the 1980s, explained the dynamic: "Every woman who has been able to stay in the game has come from a certain camp. Men who come out and make it put their stamp of approval on these women, like Eve from Ruff Ryders, Foxy from the Firm. You don't have to have it, but it's definitely a selling point."

All of the women broke this paradigm, in their own ways, pushing back against their miscasting. Some, like Missy Elliott and Lauryn Hill, rejected this role entirely. Nicki Minaj had to chart a course essentially all by herself. But everyone had to make her resistance highly salable in a market that had pigeonholed women as music-video models, little more than blowup sex dolls: to be seen and fondled (and even passed around!) but not heard. The vanguard of this new generation, Cardi B and the City Girls, figured out how to take that sex-object status and turn it on its head. They ushered in a wave of female-dominated hip-hop, with a focus on manipulating men out of their money. This

has produced a cohort of women who, like Nicki Minaj, style themselves after Barbies (Kash Doll, Asian Doll, DreamDoll) — a funny counterpoint to the men who rap like personified action figures.

SKODI



LOLA BROOKE



A result is that this moment of redress for hip-hop's high-commerce, low-parity period comes in the form of unabashedly frank music about sex, tracks that even Lil' Kim might blush at. The paradox is that it's oddly wholesome for how vulgar it is: It's so surrealistically lusty that it's invigorating, enlivening even. Who knew how many synonyms there were for lubrication? For stimulation? Like good sex, raunchy rap is only fun if all parties are completely enthusiastic, and this music provides necessary female perspectives to match what the men make. These women's output downgrades the men's sex raps into something like fan fiction — noncanonical and maybe even a little fantastical.

It isn't all just "Pound Town." Fousheé's viral 2020 hit "Deep End," for example, was inspired by the racial reckoning of that summer. And it contains a little joke on nitwits who would discount her because of her gender, delivered in a cutesy sing-songy whistle on the bridge: "You ain't finna play her/Shawty gon' get that paper/Shawty tongue rip like razor/Shawty got wit, got flavor/Pardon my tits and makeup." She told Genius, the lyrics-interpretation platform: "I wanted to make something that people can dance to as well. The song kind of goes through different dynamics: sad, angry, and this part is the climax where you're just like, All right, I made it through, I got the bag, now I'm having fun." She explained the impulse behind the song. "I'm not gonna take what was given, I'm gonna take that and flip that and make my own story out of this. Whatever story I was written into, I'm gonna rewrite it."

That's not altogether different from what Lolita Gooden did in bringing life to Roxanne, a tired man-killer character, who in her hands became an avatar for misunderstood women. And perhaps the Roxanne Wars, the initial clash in hip-hop's everlasting battle of the sexes, ended in a weary cease-fire instead of an armistice, and the ensuing four decades were just an extended conscription period. If women's rap had been confined by the commercial impulse to treat it as a sideshow, then this new wave of artists presents a kind of revenge for the years of trash talk and diminishment — a multipronged retaliation characterized by unmitigated glee.

In Miami one weekend in late July, Rolling Loud, one of the biggest annual hip-hop festivals, made itself into a microcosm of the rap world. But it was a porous world, taking cues from outside. Greta Gerwig's "Barbie" was released that weekend; Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice had remixed Aqua's "Barbie World," which was climbing the Billboard Hot 100, and hot pink was the color du jour. I spotted phone cases, netted stockings, luxury sunglasses, pom-pom skirts, crop tops, short shorts, cover-ups, mohawks, gel sandals, wigs and patchwork jeans all in the neon hue. Pretty, hyperfeminine women in magenta, with the poise of pink flamingos, stutter-stepped next to James Harden and P.J. Tucker.

KENTHEMAN

“I wanted to be a therapist before I was a rapper, so it’s like musical therapy. And people always say, ‘Oh my god, you helped me through a breakup,’ or ‘Oh my god, you give me so much confidence,’ and that’s all I’ve wanted to do.”



This ambient femme energy was also reflected in the demographics of the talent: Twenty of the 108 artists on the festival’s official poster were women. Hardly gender equality, but a far cry from the fallow periods. Although all the headliners (Playboi Carti, Travis Scott, A\$AP Rocky) were men, some of the women generated even more attention. Echoing Grace Jones in “Boomerang,” Sexy Red emerged onstage for her set with two men she walked on leashes. Yung Miami of the City Girls was the talk of TMZ and other tabloids for allowing her 10-year-old son to throw money at strippers backstage. The more heartwarming viral moments belonged to them, too: Coi Leray made headlines when Benzino, her estranged father — a former rapper and onetime co-owner of the hip-hop magazine *The Source* — looked emotional when seeing her perform, apparently for the first time.

In some ways, Coi Leray is an emblematic figure of this generation: She is sex-positive and makes vivacious, danceable music, perfect for a party or a TikTok challenge. “Players,” her biggest hit, is a two-minute ditty about young women having the same capacity for agency — sexual, musical, geographical — as men. (“I go on and on and on again, he blowin’ up my phone but I’m ignorin’ him/He thinking he the one, I got like four of him.”) Styled for her Rolling Loud performance with a short Halle Berry hairdo and black leather-and-chains costume, she looked like a Bond girl in a *Cirque du Soleil* show.

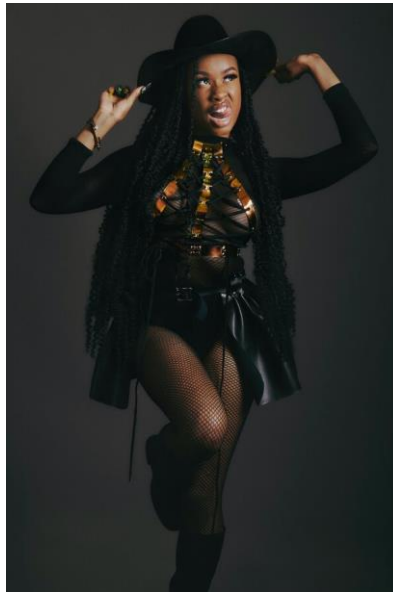
The “Players” instrumental samples liberally from Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message.” Released in 1982, “The Message” is widely considered one of the greatest hip-hop songs of all time and comprises a roll call of then-contemporary catastrophes in its lines: drug addiction, violence, rising inflation. (“Don’t push me cause I’m close to the edge/I’m trying not to lose my head.”) It’s also considered one of the first socially conscious records, and it steered rap in a more streetwise direction than, say, the hippity-hops and bang-bang boogies of Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” did. And this divide — between the impulses in “The Message” and “Rapper’s Delight” — has been a central tension of hip-hop, this party music born in the bombed-out South Bronx, for as long as it has been around.

Americans now find themselves in a moment of similar social breakdown: postpandemic inflation, opioid addiction, a mental-health crisis, racial and sexual violence. And a lot of the music has become unremittingly grim in response. There's a relentless gender pessimism in the air, too — on the street, on dating apps, in the Supreme Court and, of course, in rap music. "Players" is a kind of rebuttal to all of this. Here, you have Leray gesturing toward a hidden resonance in "The Message," which is that the music can still be fun, no matter how the world makes us feel. The bridge is a connection to different types of pleasure: "Bout to catch another flight, the apple bottom make him wanna bite/I just wanna have a good night." Leray treats the body as more than just a vessel that has to be guarded because it can be taken away, a common refrain in the men's music: She demonstrates how one can be *carried away* in song.

BIG BOSS VETTE



PAP CHANEL



On the last day of the Rolling Loud festival, I sat down with Flo Milli. In 2018, after years of refining her craft, she released “Beef FloMix,” a flip of a song by Playboi Carti, and it blew up on SoundCloud and TikTok. Her rise reflects the trajectory of a lot of young female artists, who use the internet to experiment, connect with collaborators and ultimately advance their careers: Tierra Whack, whose album “Whack World” went viral online because of its eye-popping visual component; Fousheé, who got her start making royalty-free music for an internet platform; KenTheMan, whose stage name is the username she had on SoundCloud, the popular music-streaming service. “I kinda came up during, like, Covid, so everything was on the internet,” Flo said. “That feeling never gets old to me, being able to perform and talk to my fans.”

We were in an air-conditioned trailer that the magazine was using to shoot photos, and after she finished angling her inquisitive features this way and that, it occurred to me that she could have been a fashion model in another context. Or, in an earlier era, she — like so many of the women — could have been relegated to “video vixen” status. Her long, washed-out blond wig was brushed back behind her shoulders so that it was out of her face, and it swayed a little when she talked. We sat in the shadow of the gigantic lamp that lit the set, and occasionally the jewels in her nose ring, Cartier watch and bellybutton piercing shined subtly in the half-light, coruscating in time with her movements.

Flo Milli put the resurgence in perspective. “If you look at the history, it was always female rappers. But at one point, it was male-dominated, and all you hear is these men degrading women, or not really making us feel loved.” Flo Milli is 23, and strikingly — for a member of a generation that seems to live in the permanent now — she has a real reverence and affection for the history of rap music. I had asked her who her favorite old-school artist was, and the first name she said was M.C. Lyte, whom she and her sister would listen to in her mother’s car in Mobile, Ala., where she grew up. They would rhyme all the lyrics of “Lyte as a Rock” front to back some two decades after its release. In an instant, Flo channeled that car karaoke, rapping the first verse of that song from memory. Her fizzy falsetto rose and rose as she delved deeper into her delivery. Her translucent nails, painted a school-bus yellow, flashed like toy lightsabers as she made elaborate rap hands that unfolded the way origami fortunetellers do in grade-school classrooms. When she was almost finished reciting the verse, her voice climaxed as she recreated the “Ly-ly-lyte as a rock!” sample, and she was beaming.

From her perspective, this earlier era offered greater freedom because, even if women’s roles were constrained, the men were less subject to gendered expectations than they are now. “If you look at the male rappers from the ’90s, you had all these love songs; men were not afraid to profess their love. But now it’s different. I think what it was is that it backfired on them: all the degrading, all the [expletive] that they was talking about us. We internalized it, but not really, and was like, OK, we finna reflect that back on y’all. Not really fighting fire with fire, but I feel we kinda found our strength and power in it.”

She looked slightly into the middle distance, her thoughts churning and gathering momentum, as she continued: “Wait, we can really find our voice in this and actually be an example for other women. To show them: No, you can really be a boss. You don’t have to take the bare minimum. You don’t have to take disrespect. You can really win and achieve anything you want in this life. I think that’s why a lot of women are put on the forefront, because that’s maybe what the world needs.”

Niela Orr is a story editor for the magazine. Her recent work includes [a profile of the actress Keke Palmer](#), an [essay about the end of “Atlanta”](#) and [a feature on the metamusical “A Strange Loop.”](#) **Adrienne Raquel** is a photographer and art director in New York and Los Angeles whose work is inspired by femininity, soulfulness and color.

How Hip-Hop Conquered the World - The New York Times

We're celebrating hip-hop's 50th anniversary this week. Wesley Morris traces the art form from its South Bronx origins to all-encompassing triumph.



By [Wesley Morris](#)

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We've gathered here today to raise a glass to hip-hop. It's 50, baby! Half a century of effrontery, dexterity, elasticity, rambunctiousness, ridiculousness, bleakness, spunk, swagger, juice, jiggle and wit, of defiant arrogance, devastating humor, consumptive lust and violent distress, of innovation, danger, doubt and drip. Salud! I'll be honest, though. I knew the magazine covers and concerts and TV specials were coming, but I wasn't feeling it. Seemed too arbitrary a date. Or maybe just impossible to ascertain. What I did feel was that hip-hop has so thoroughly infused the atmosphere of American life (we'll just start with this country), that it has pushed so much forward — who cares that it's pushing 50?

The energy giving this form its art, this life its force — wasn't that forged centuries ago with every African hauled onto this land? As far I could tell, hip-hop was just "always." That energy has been with us Black Americans — in church, on stages, in studios, on the streets, in outfits and hair and posture and teeth, glinting, grinning, gritting, smirking, snarling, beaming, blinging. Simply smiling a miraculous-ass smile. So this anniversary couldn't matter, according to me, because — well, isn't it just on a continuum that bends from the African drum to the spiritual to ragtime, jazz, gospel and the blues, to R.&B., folk, rock 'n' roll, funk, disco, new wave and house? Isn't it also just more soul music, an energy that never dissipates but simply changes hosts?

Well ...

Well ...

I was down to bring that dogma to my grave. But somebody made a case, and the case made a fool of me. It was February, at the Grammys, when in the middle of the broadcast, almost two dozen rap acts took the stage, one by one, and owned the history they made, the history they were. There was even a historian: [Ahmir \(Questlove\) Thompson](#), who, among sundry other skills and passions, drums for the Roots and harbors a knack for the fine print and footnotes of American popular music.

For [Grammy night](#), his job entailed boiling down five decades to 15 minutes, and some uncanny artisanship resulted. On the generations came, each one submitting no more than a snippet — a TikTok-ya-don't-stop, if you will. The Roots' rapper in chief, Black

Thought, opened with a fairy tale. “Fifty years ago, a street princess was born to be an icon,” it began. Then appeared a whirl of originators. Grandmaster Flash with Barshon, Melle Mel, Rahiem and Scorpio, who melded into Run-DMC. And Run-DMC into LL Cool J. LL Cool J into DJ Jazzy Jeff. Jazzy Jeff into Salt-N-Pepa. Those two into Rakim, who was followed by Chuck D and Flavor Flav. That was simply the first course of three loosely chronological movements. The third closed with the progeny: Lil Baby then GloRilla then Lil Uzi Vert.



Run-DMC with their fan Teddy No Neck, 1985. Josh Cheuse



Almighty Kay Gee of the Cold Crush Brothers at Harlem World, 1981. Joe Conzo Archives



The break dancers Ken Swift and, in the background, Take One and Frosty Freeze of Rock Steady Crew, 1982. David Corio



Terminator X, Flavor Flav, Chuck D and Professor Griff of Public Enemy, 1987.

The performances may not have lasted long. But revelations overtook me anyway, like how physical this music has always been to make, how bodily. Salt-N-Pepa, Kid 'n Play, MC Hammer, Missy Elliott, Beyoncé — they dance. That's not what I mean. I'm talking about how you can't just stand there and rap. Hands jab. Wrists snap. Heels stomp. Heads nod, bob, swivel, swing. Whatever parts can make action, do: Fingers, shoulders, brows. Used to be the move to kind of bow your legs, one hand on each thigh, bend forward and rock. LL would do this so hard his gold ropes would be punching him in the mouth. Suddenly something amazed me that just an hour before seemed as elemental as "it takes two to make a thing go right." And that's this: The body raps, too. Listen, I could go on, droolingly, about innate hip-hop hotness, about the bodaciousness of physiques: LL and Lil' Kim, Tupac, Trina and 50 Cent; about Cardi B. About the rocket-science profundity in the hook of one of Megan Thee Stallion's hits: "Body-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody"



Queen Latifah, around 1990. Credit...Al Pereira/Michael Ochs Archives, via Getty Images

But I think what was actually dawning on me that night had less to do with hip-hop's erotic possibilities and more to do with a new (also sexy) frontier: the accrual of carriage, grace, prestige, of stature. Now, this didn't hit me until Queen Latifah took the stage to do a snatch of "U.N.I.T.Y." What she wore was black and puffed; her vest, it sparkled. What astral slope had she downhill to be there? In her early prime, Latifah's limbs and head epitomized this style of embodiment. She nodded with aggression, yet her conical African hats (crowns!) refused to capsize. She could still throw down but in the way only someone in middle age might, with the force of calm, the surety of having fully lived. When I was 13, my question — everybody's question — was what could this music look like at 50? Would it just be the old dude trying to mack at the club? Washed up. *Sad*. Mm mm. It really could be like going to catch Dee Dee Bridgewater or Dianne Reeves or Cassandra Wilson at Lincoln Center. It could be this. Grand. Presidential.

None of this resplendence was irony-free. We're talking about the celebration of an art form by an awards show that neglected it. The Grammys' first rap category didn't arrive until 1989, and there had been no plan to present the award during the live broadcast. So some of the nominated acts, including the Fresh Prince (Will Smith) and Salt-N-Pepa, boycotted. Turbulence has abounded ever since. Hip-hop may have, as Black Thought declared during the anniversary segment's curtain raiser, come to dominate the world, but only twice has it won album of the year. And the community has come to feel some type of way.

Here then is why I can't exclaim that hip-hop is on a continuum and call it a day. Here is why it's apart from spirituals and jazz, blues, R.&B. and rock 'n' roll while also being a piece. Here's why the passage of these decades matters: Hip-hop, baby of the American musical family, has for 50 years been a contested category, unsettled because it remains unsettling, somehow unsung despite its centrality to multitudes. Tears salted my pizza that night because what I thought would be another awards-show nostalgia spasm was really a proclamation of endurance and a pungent condemnation. Here is music you can hear while dining out at a place where the only Black people are you and the dining room's soundtrack. There aren't many countries left on this planet that don't have some kind of hip-hop scene or rap patois, some at-best oblivious comfort with "nigga" this and that. Yet there's often a chip on some rapper's shoulder, on some rap fan's. Because it's quite something, half a century in, to carry with you the suspicion that the thing you made might be valued more than the people you are. This is a continuum concern, of course: Every phase of Black artistic achievement treks through that cognitive-dissonance zone. The Negro spiritual is the other major American music whose existence floodlights a crime. But spirituals sought deliverance from this country's original sin. Hip-hop doesn't expect salvation. An alternate reality drives its craftspeople. Maybe nobody wants us to succeed. So we'll deliver ourselves. Let's build an empire from that.



Pepa, Salt and DJ Spinderella of Salt-N-Pepa, 1989. Al Pereira/Michael Ochs Archives, via Getty Images



Biz Markie, 2001. Mike Schreiber



LL Cool J, 1988. Catherine McGann/Getty Images



Tupac (center), 1994. Mike Miller

I'm just younger enough than hip-hop to have taken the empire for granted all these decades and just old enough to ask some urgent questions. What's the point of this art form anyway? Why did we need it? Why did we need it so bad that it spread from the Bronx to everywhere else? Would there even be hip-hop had events in this country gone differently, gone farther, in Black Americans' favor. Then I suppose I have to ask: which events? And how many would have had to go just right and stay right in order to complete Black Americans' trajectory toward actual freedom, to head off the full force of hip-hop's coming this vibrantly to life? Some back-of-the-napkin ruminating tells me that hip-hop was inevitable because this country has never been consistently sure about how to treat us. The mere fact of hip-hop denounces that inconsistency. It maybe shouldn't exist. But here it is. In everything. Indicting.

This 50th anniversary dates to the night, in the Bronx, in August 1973, that Kool Herc stood over a set of turntables and combined two records to form one continuous breakbeat. Doesn't sound too seismic when you put it that way. But this was it: the Big Bang, a mythical event. And when you do put it that way, these 50 years really do have to stand on their own. The earliest blues artists were enslaved. Depending on when you think jazz was born — we're talking about both history and mythology here — its originators had parents who were enslaved. The inventors of rock 'n' roll hail-hailed from parts central and south. But hip-hop happens right about when the Great Migration winds down. Its beginnings are overwhelmingly Northern and completely urban.

A D.J. would play records, and crews would dance. The early M.C.s? They were personalities who sometimes talked over the music. Rhyming and beat-making machinery, those came later. Inertia? Idleness? Conditions hip-hop was born trying to solve. How to keep b-boys and b-girls breaking all night? D.J.s invented the cure. "Hip-hop" identified a culture that already existed but made kids, adolescents and barely-adults make sense to themselves. The *new* New Negroes — fresh, then dope, then fly, then fire, then rizzy. They were also, to invoke a timeless community-outreach, daily-news euphemism, at-risk. Condemned.

This music had penury, denial and neglect in common with its forebears and was developed down in a particularly hopeless ravine, amid the national abandonment of the post-Civil Rights movement, after the feel-good Blackness of Motown was deemed passé, when Afros and dashikis were part of the urban uniform and even Sidney Poitier was directing blaxploitation movies. White suburbanites rallied to stop Richard Nixon from stopping housing discrimination (not that ending it was his idea). Ronald Reagan slashed the housing-and-urban-development budget by about 70 percent. Elevators stayed broken. Trash piled up. Drugs stormed in and with them even harsher law enforcement. (Oh! Guess what else turns 50 this year: the D.E.A.)



DJ Jazzy Jeff, left, and the Fresh Prince, 1986. Credit...David Corio

You might expect a blues to take hold, or at least an ambivalence. Nope. An exuberant, insistent, impossible resolve defined early hip-hop, the jive part of the blues, the imaginative toughness, the tautological thriving. “That’s the breaks, that’s the breaks.” “It’s like a jungle sometimes. It makes me wonder how I keep from going under.” “It’s like that, and that’s the way it is. *Huuh!*”

The music was streetbound, and the people performing it could be as hard as concrete and blacktop, as smooth as menthol smoke, in leather and velour and denim, in Shelltops, Jordans. And eventually Tims, in Coogis, in tracksuits with Kangols, Cazals, stopwatches and kitchen-clock garlands, gold ropes you could use to moor a yacht and gold earrings fit for announcing yourself at a castle door. They were battle-tested, arriving as victors, always slaying never slain; canniness and certitude were more

important than luck. Defense outfitted as offense — pre-emptive style. LL Cool J's first appearance on the Billboard Hot 100 was for the scratchy, boom-bapping wall-crawler he called "I'm Bad," and the interludes of a police manhunt between the verses tell me he knew that, not even a quarter century before, he might have been nightsticked (at best) for thinking so highly of himself.

The thrill of the music, the lifestyle — that life force — has been in its array of swaggers: MC Lyte's sniping allergy to fools, Big Daddy Kane's lounging back-pats (his own), Rakim's cashmere self-portraiture, Salt-N-Pepa's tag-team assertiveness. The audacity of both bagginess and hip-huggery. The collage work rightly deemed mix-mastery.

Eyebrows might arch at any art form as reliant upon the performance of cockiness. But when vertiginous pride emanates from Black egos, eyes tend to burn in their sockets.

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It's not as if Black artistic expression has ever relied on doubt. Consider all that it took for Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, Billie Holiday or for Mahalia Jackson, Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis Jr. or Miles Davis, for the Supremes and the Temptations to embody then exude excellence during an era in which that sort of confidence was all but illegal in certain counties, when you were likely to have had a parent who fled those places. It's just that a certain decorum was expected.



Posdnous, Maseo and Trugoy The Dove of De La Soul, 1993. David Corio/Redferns, via Getty Images



The Notorious B.I.G., 1995. Jonathan Mannion



DJ Yella, MC Ren, Easy-E and Dr. Dre of N.W.A. Lgi Stock/Corbis, via VCG, via Getty Images



MCA, Mike D and Ad-Rock of the Beastie Boys, 1987 Vinnie Zuffante/Michael Ochs Archives, via Getty Images

Take Motown. Berry Gordy put his artists through a rigorous etiquette program, to make them palatable to the crowds of Jim Crow-tolerant white people who would be

seeing them in concert or from their living rooms. I've wondered what kind of rappers a charm school might produce. I've also thought about what just a little charmlessness might have done for — or to! — the Motown sound. Charm afforded Motown its bounteous luxury. But by the late 1970s and early 1980s, Black decorum had reached its political limit. Gordy's big new star was the magnetically louche Rick James, a hip-hop progenitor. The early rappers weren't arguing for integration. They cultivated iconography all their own: hair styles, accessories, attitudes, these celebratory exponents of apartness, of apartheid (in America). The art form's greatest innovation was its mass-production of unfettered, un-self-conscious self-esteem, of retributive refulgence. Boy, could you feel that. Friends and classmates took on such an unsinkable boldness that I can't imagine them without this music and its style.

But around the country, all kinds of people were encouraged, by Hollywood and the news, to be scared of Black youth (as they were called). Some of those people took out full-page ads wishing them the death penalty. Some chased them from neighborhoods and mistook them for piñatas. Our parents, though, weren't afraid of the kids and the rappers those kids adored, not necessarily. The moms and dads and grandparents, the aunts, uncles and older cousins, understood the old life-or-death stakes. They knew that hip-hop had unleashed a new confrontational energy. They were afraid *for* them.

I've thought sincerely about whether hip-hop's boastfulness was a wonder drug for Black psyches in search of street-level hope. These rappers emerged from the same poverty a lot of us knew. But they turned that doubt into bright-sided art. So many Black children were scolded and mocked for dreaming of careers in basketball and rap. The odds were worse than low. We're talking about young people, though. They dream. Somebody really is always making it in hip-hop. Why not one of them? I grew up watching all the practicing and rehearsing and studying, the rigor. The dream was big. They knew they could maybe be paid to fly, paid to flow. They could turn on a radio or press play on a mixtape and hear the flight.

For 50 years, the essential writing — fables, comedies, diaries; adventure, memoir, porn — about young Black life in this country has been happening in hip-hop. Songs about feelings, fantasies, dilemmas, confessions, fantasias. What else is Notorious B.I.G.'s "Ready to Die" and its grueling, knowing, melodic re-creation of moral decay and sexual congress other than a triumph of literature? It is but one title on a shelf buckling with scores of comparable powerhouses. That's one masterpiece set in New York.

What eventually brews in Houston and Atlanta, Miami, New Orleans and Memphis, in Virginia and California, deepens hip-hop, takes it into freaky, funky, bouncy, hilarious, mischievously brewed realms, dark, dreamy, unstable landscapes. Frailty, paranoia, trippiness, Afrocentrism and minimalism emerge. It's music mining the past but potently about the present, often about itself. Hip-hop kids didn't know a national struggle for civil rights as more than lore or part of a lesson plan. They had experienced personal strife — the struggle for food, shelter, safety, stability, jobs and respect. How many of these artists came of age in or adjacent to public housing and the criminal-justice system? Plight was in the art.

Image



Missy Elliott, 1998. Credit...David Corio/Redferns, via Getty Images

Hip-hop represents a break with the past because it exploded out of something that broke: this country's promise to its Black citizens. And unlike aspects of jazz and Motown, this new music wouldn't be arguing for its resplendence, worthiness and incomparable ingenuity. Salves, appeasement, subtlety, civility, love — those evidently didn't work because here we are. *Bring the noise.*

Its practitioners may have attended church, but there's little church in this music, especially during its first waves, just communal jubilation and the streets. "La di da di, we like to party" alongside "I never prayed to God, I prayed to Gotti." Hip-hop arose from want. It thrived in gain. The average love song culminates in consumption, brandishing what has been consumed. Capitalism has been trying to turn its back on Black America and to break Black America's back. Hip-hop is Julia Roberts after being written off in "Pretty Woman" by that snooty sales lady: *Big mistake. Big. Huge.* The drug dealers and gangbangers weren't my cup of tea. I more naturally gravitated to the nerds, bohemians and space cadets, the corners of the music that got called "conscious rap." But I never bought that designation. You don't enumerate the risks and luxuriate in the spoils of, say, the drug business unconsciously. How could you lavish such attention on production and rhythm, how could you realize such vision, with half a mind? Choices are being made, the choice to be frank, blunt, hyperbolic, wishful, catchy. Whatever pathology's in the art form mirrors whatever pathology exists in the environment, in

hip-hop's, in the nation's. "Cash rules everything around me" — "C.R.E.A.M." — functions as much as an excuse as it does as a rationale. Luxury has become a source of irony (I mean, the fact of Gucci Mane, alone) and a kind of getting even. What's it Bey said? Best revenge is your paper.

Before that reunion at the Grammys, I knew all the places the life force had gone and all it had come to mean. But after, I got to thinking about its stupendous range. Take the rap voice, for instance. It's an instrument with timbres and pitches that expand at least my understanding of what else it means to sing — and if it's Ol' Dirty Bastard, Eminem, Nicki Minaj and Kendrick Lamar, we're talking about singing in the rain, a monsoon. There's almost nowhere hip-hop hasn't been: the White House, the Pulitzers, the Oscars, the sitcom, the Louvre, syllabi, country radio, fashion week, Sesame Street. It uses some of everything, and everything uses some of it. But its longevity and ubiquity amount to more than what's stamped in its passport. Even when its practitioners aren't Black, maybe especially when they're white, hip-hop incriminates the country that drove its people to dream it up in the first place. For it contains the stubborn truth of how America has felt about certain Americans. Hip-hop is what this country gets.



Jay-Z, 2007. Damon Winter/The New York Times



Wyclef Jean and Lauryn Hill of the Fugees, 1993. Lisa Leone



Nas, far left, with friends in Queens, 1993. Danny Clinch



Snoop Dogg, 2000. Mike Miller

It still possesses incantatory powers. But it also continues to acquire a tremendous capacity for melancholy, for a blues of sorts. The same group who fretted about C.R.E.A.M. also chanted, in harmony, that “you can’t party your life away, drink your life away, smoke your life away, [expletive] your life away, dream your life away, scheme your life away, ’cause your seeds grow up the same way.” That was 26 years ago. In the B.L.M. era, the seeds sound addled. The early boom-bap and the disco backbeats that exploded into a galaxy of sounds has, in its current incarnation, returned to a new, samey orthodoxy of beats that, for not much longer than two minutes, stutter, drag and drone. A little weed used to be all a rapper needed to get by; now it’s zany. It’s not just nerves that seek settling anymore. It’s entire psyches. The canon makes room for breakdowns: Lauryn Hill’s, Kendrick Lamar’s, Kanye West’s. Happiness and abandon are now hard to come by, that old sauce. The rappers seem to know this. They’re rhyming with a lot fewer words for the moment. The sound of some of this music doubles as another environmental mirror. Somebody thought to call it “trap.”

Maybe another reason that that Grammy anniversary segment got to me was that it worked in defiance of the current gravity. It felt stress-free and full of exhalation, but, as crucial, also put inhalation on poignant display. As a practical matter, this wasn’t news. We karaoke people have our personal Everests. “Paid in Full” and “Mama Said Knock You Out” are mine. Very different songs in divergent styles. One is silk, the other is steroids. To pull either off, you have to know how to breathe. This is true enough for singing. But rapping requires the kind of respiration that a swimmer depends on: mechanical but rhythmic. (To excel at either, it helps to know your way around a freestyle.) Rappers have to time when in the stroke to snatch some air. Snatch wrong and choke. You have to be precise while still being you. Some rappers, like Busta Rhymes, rarely get caught taking a breath. A karaoke rapper will tell you: It’s not for the weak. I know someone who can perform “Tha Crossroads” as though Bone Thugs-n-Harmony were his government name. But by the time he’s done, he practically needs CPR.

At the Grammys, as Busta stood there and 50-meter-backstroked his way through “Look at Me Now,” no one seemed to quite believe that he could still rap that fast that breathlessly. It wasn’t him at his most pinpoint. (His stroke made a lot of splash.) But when he finished, nobody called the paramedics either. They cheered. Cheered the dexterity, obviously, but also that he still had it, that everybody over the age of what, 28?, still had it, could still do the one thing we’ve heard so many of us, in states of distress, plead for: breathe.

Nobody thought it would last this long. Maybe that’s some deeply ingrained self-doubt talking. Not everything lasts. And not everybody made it. Reason enough to pause and pay tribute, to say, “hip-hop hooray!” What they’ve made, however, has lasted. That’s what started my waterworks. Everybody was still breathing. Yeah, many of them are still alive and all. But also: They’re still able to make breath, deep, exhilarating breath.

[Wesley Morris](#) is a critic at large and the co-host, with Jenna Wortham, of the culture podcast “[Still Processing](#).” He has won two Pulitzer Prizes for criticism, including in 2021 for a set of essays that explored the intersection of race and pop culture. [More about Wesley Morris](#)