

5-2019

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Recommended Citation

Jimmerson, Dominique, ""What Is An MC If He Can't Rap?"" (2019). *Capstone Projects and Master's Theses*. 569.
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“What Is an MC if He Can’t Rap?”

Hip hop is a genre that has seen much attention in mainstream media in recent years. It is becoming one of the most dominant genres in the world and influencing popular culture more and more as the years go on. One of the main things that makes hip hop unique from other genres is the emphasis on the lyricist. While many other genres will have a drummer, guitarist, bassist, or keyboardist, hip hop is different because most songs are not crafted in the traditional way of a band putting music together. Because of this, the genre tends to focus on the lyrics. The goal of this paper is to show how the term lyricist has come to exist within the genre and also to highlight the top lyricists of the times while examining what made their words stand out during their time. The final goal of this paper is to show how lyricism has evolved throughout time to where it sits now within the genre.

The first question one who is not well versed in rap might ask is “what is a lyricist?” *Merriam-Webster* simply describes it as “a person who writes the words of a song.” However in hip hop, the term lyricist holds a lot more weight; the term lyricist is not just given to anyone who can make a song. Rather, the title lyricist is given to people who are able to take words and either create a message or cleverly use poetic devices to put words together. Sometimes a great lyricist is able to do both, giving them more credit and establishment in the world of hip

hop. Many have come into the genre and established themselves as legendary lyricists - even redefining the term lyricist during their time. However, before describing those who have paved the way for lyricism to thrive, we have to establish the history that hip hop has gone through to understand why these lyricists were important.

Hip hop was born in the Bronx of New York in the Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods. In the beginning hip hop was broken down into four elements: DJing, graffiti, B-boying, and MCing. Originally an MC was just, as the name suggests, a master of ceremonies; the MC would accompany the DJ, who was at the time the main focus of the event, with the MC being there simply to hype up the crowd and give more attention to the DJ who was scratching records and giving energy to the crowd. Here and there the MC would come up with rhymes over what the DJ was doing, but it wasn't anything that would be considered the rapping of today's caliber (*Hip-Hop Evolution*).

One of the earliest examples of an MC came from DJ Hollywood who got much of his style and influence from Pigeat Markham. Hollywood said that "Pigeat Markham introduced me to the flow of it, and the humor," which created the difference between his style of MCing from the others at that time (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). Truly it all came from his rhythmic cadence; rather than just saying things to keep the crowd energetic, the words he used actually followed with the rhythm being performed by the DJ. His lyrics at the time weren't very amazing. However, they were something new and innovative at the time to garner attention. Even today there is still much argument as to whether Hollywood was truly apart of the culture of hip hop because many of the events that Hollywood played were considered disco shows. Many of the elements of hip hop weren't seen at these shows, such as break dancing. During this time if

anyone was breakdancing at these shows they were asked to leave, and a dress code was enforced: "In order to go to a Hollywood party, you had to have a suit and tie on...and when we were able to get inside we would start breaking and they would cut the music off" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). At this time hip hop was still underground and considered the culture of the youth while disco was still prevalent with the generation prior. Hip hop still didn't truly have a face or scene in the public eye. It was being birthed in the streets of the ghettos. Eventually groups like Grandmaster Flash and The Furious 5 and The Funky Four Plus One started to emerge as groups displaying rhythmic flow on their songs. However, many of these MCs weren't even being put on records; rapping was still something only done at parties, live shows or in the parks of New York: "Anybody who's from the first generation of the hip-hop circle, the idea of making a record was not a reality in anyone's mind" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). This was music simply made by the streets for the streets.

It wasn't until Sugar Hill Gang came out with the song "Rapper's Delight" that rap music would finally be put down on wax and put out into the public eye. Sugar Hill Gang had created a hit song that flooded into the mainstream eye and brought attention to the world of hip hop: "Hip hop exploded because of 'Rapper's Delight;' it was the first worldwide gigantic hit. it ushered in a whole new genre of music" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). Prior to this record nobody had ever truly seen the genre on such a huge platform, and hip hop would finally begin to be noticed in the eyes of the mainstream. However, this song still wasn't a true representation of what was going on in the streets. It was very commercial in sound with many elements of disco. The biggest crime the song committed was biting, or stealing rhymes. The rhymes said by Big Bank Hank were taken from Grandmaster CAZ:

Check it out, I'm the C-A-S-AN, the O-V-A and the rest is F-L-Y

You see, I go by the code of the doctor of the mix and these reasons I'll tell you why

You see I'm six foot one and I'm tons of fun and I dress to a tee

You see I got more clothes than Muhammad Ali and I dress so viciously

These lyrics and the rest of Hank's verses were already written by Caz, and Caz never received any credit for them. As Grandmixer DXT described, "Hank was saying a rhyme that we had heard at the parties already. He's saying somebody else's rhymes and for us that was a catastrophic no-no at the time." (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). One of the rules that is enforced in hip-hop, and is often still seen today, is that you never steal another MC's rhymes.

While "Rapper's Delight" helped give attention to rap in the public eye, there were still no lyricists at the forefront of the movement. Rap was still seen as a new phenomenon and had the possibility of being a fad that would just come and go. It wasn't until Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five released the record "The Message" that both the streets and the mainstream audience were able to find a song that had lasting impact in the culture. "The Message" was a song that told about day-to-day life in the ghettos in the Bronx. For a lot of the urban community this was the first time they heard someone talking about the tough life that they lived. The words in this song were revolutionary for rap at the time as they were words no one knew could be said on a song. According to Grandmaster Flash, "That song is like a window into urban America for people who have never seen urban America or are too afraid to go in" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). People from outside this community were getting to see how life was like on the other side from these firsthand accounts:

My brother's doing bad, stole my mother's TV

Says she watches too much, it's just not healthy
All My Children in the daytime, *Dallas* at night
Can't even see the game or the Sugar Ray fight
The bill collectors, they ring my phone
And scare my wife when I'm not home
Got a bum education, double-digit inflation
Can't take the train to the job, there's a strike at the station
Neon King Kong standing on my back
Can't stop to turn around, broke my sacroiliac
A mid-range migraine, cancered membrane
Sometimes I think I'm going insane
I swear I might hijack a plane!
Broke my sacroiliac
A mid-range migraine, cancered membrane
Sometimes I think I'm going insane
I swear I might hijack a plane! (Mellie Mel, "The Message")

These lyrics were able to show the life of the average person living in the ghetto during the Reagan administration and show how difficult it is to just survive. This was very revolutionary during the time because no one felt a song like that could be made and see any type of success: "Until then everything every song that came out was a party song. Initially we didn't want to do the song because it was something we weren't used to, but we did it because it was socially relevant and it had something to say" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). This record truly wanted to

showcase the environment they lived in and what was seen through their eyes daily. The chorus also uses very creative imagery to describe the world they live in:

Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge

I'm trying not to lose my head

It's like a jungle sometimes

It makes me wonder how I keep from going under (Melli Mel, "The Message")

Describing their everyday environment as a jungle brings forth how bad and lawless it felt living in the ghetto during that time. It also showcases what it can do to a person living there: putting them on the edge on a day to day basis. With this song Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five were able to create a record that impacted the hip hop community. They were one of the first in hip hop to show that someone could speak about topics bigger than partying, and they solidified their place as lyricists in hip hop. The magnitude of this song can still be seen in hip hop today; "The Message" has been referenced and re-spun in many different ways.

Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five were able to break ground with putting together lyrics that spoke on a conscious level. However this record would be a novelty at the time "Most rap hits until then were R&B party records with rhymes flowing over them" (George). It wasn't until 1984 that a new group would begin to take rise and become the hot topic within the world of hip hop. The group was known as Run-DMC. Run-DMC were a group comprised of members Joseph Simmons (Rev Run), Darryl McDaniels, and Jason Mizell, they helped usher in a new style because "they had the hard-rhyming style that perfectly complemented the minimalistic production. Backed by 19-year-old DJ Jason "Jam Master Jay" Mizell, Run hurled rhymes with a zealot's fury, while D.M.C.'s hardy baritone invested every

couplet with power” (George 1). Run-DMC were very different during their time because they were very casual rappers: “All of a sudden you have a group who dresses the way you dress... they dress like you, and it was explosive” (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). While many other rappers prior were making records to get people dancing, Run-DMC were more known for telling stories about daily life that were slightly different from the way Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five talked about the negative things that were happening. They were one of the first to put in the art of storytelling in their rhymes with songs like “You Be Illin” and “My Adidas.” “My Adidas” was a song just telling about how much they enjoy their sneakers:

My Ahhh-didas, standin’ on two fifth street

Funky fresh and yes cold on my feet

With no shoestring in 'em, I did not win 'em

I bought 'em off the ave. with the black Lee denim

I like to sport 'em, that's why I bought 'em

My Ahhh-didas, standin; on two fifth street

Funky fresh and yes cold on my feet

With no shoestring in 'em, I did not win 'em

I bought 'em off the ave. with the black Lee denim

I like to sport 'em, that's why I bought 'em

A sucker tried to steal 'em so I caught 'em and I fought 'em (DMC, “My Adidas)

The lyrics were fun and playful but still showed the day-to-day life of an average person. The song “You Be Illin” as well is a prime example of telling a story of daily life while maintaining a fun vibe:

(One) day when I was chillin' in Kentucky Fried Chicken

Just mindin' my business, eatin' food and finger lickin'

This dude walked in lookin' strange and kind of funny

Went up to the front with a menu and his money

He didn't walk straight, kind of side to side

He asked this old lady, "Yo, yo, um...is this Kentucky Fried?"

The lady said "Yeah," smiled and he smiled back

He gave a quarter and his order, small fries, Big Mac! (DMC, "You Be Illin'")

For most people telling a story about going into KFC wouldn't make for an interesting song topic, yet Run-DMC were able to take it and make their rhymes nice and fun. Run-DMC would have their time as great rappers, but by 1987 many would be floored by a new MC.

Rakim was born as William Michael Griffin, Jr. and in 1987, he and his DJ released the album *Paid In Full* (Allah). Rakim would be considered by most hip-hop heads as the first lyricist whose "rhyme style would easily set the tone for what hip-hop has become today" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). What made Rakim different from the average MC was not only the words that he said, but also the way he executed those words. Many would consider him the first to bring flow and intricate rhythms to his rhymes. Rakim himself said "if i can rhyme like John Coltrane played the sax then I'd know the rhythms and the intricacy of it would be crazy" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). It was the way he rapped over the beat that allowed the words he said to be more potent and help bring notice to the rhyme schemes he created. An example comes from the song "I Know You Got Soul." He states:

You wanna rhyme, you gotta sign my list

Cause I'm a manifest and bless the mic I hold

You want it next? Then you gotta have soul

Cause if you ain't got it, I'm a make an encore

Take the mic, make the people respond for

The R, cause that's the way it'll have to be

If you wanna get on after me

Rakim would often use rhyme schemes different from other MCs during the time like using slant rhymes rather than doing an average AB rhyme pattern. He was very much known for the rhythm that he had while maneuvering words around the beat. Prior to him not many people were able to ride the beat as smoothly as he did. One song truly showing off his talents would be "No Competition" in which Rakim is attempting to show why he was the best at his craft during the time:

No one in my path can withstand

Under pressure the wrath of a swift man

You name the day, the grounds could be neutral

Speak your piece, the feeling's mutual

We can go topic from topic whenever I drop it

Try to stop it....

In every network, the R's the expert

Whoever goes against causes friction

Introduction, music, where's the mixing

Ra will never die, soon they'll never try

Since Rakim was able to bend many words to fit the beat seeing the words on paper wasn't enough to get the vibe Rakim was sending rather you had to hear the full package. As DJ Premiere describes, "He just wasn't doing patterns that were normal to other MCs that were making records" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). It was the way he spoke that helped make him stand out from the other rappers before him.

There was only one other MC that was able to rival Rakim at the time, and this MC was known as Big Daddy Kane. He was special and different from his competition at the time because he "oozed cool and charisma" (Baker). Much like Rakim, Big Daddy Kane was known for the flow of his rhymes, but Big Daddy had slightly more creative way of using words in his rhyme and crafting unique rhymes. On his debut album *Long Live the Kane*, he set himself apart by creating rhymes with nuance and many clever metaphors. He shows this exceptionally well on the song "RAW":

I start to go, my rhymes'll flow
So, get up and dance cause Kane said so
If you were lounging around it's time to get up
Pardon my expression, but I'mma tear shit up
I appear right here, and scare and dare, a mere musketeer
That would dare to compare, I do declare
Getting busy is where it's at...
Here I am, R-A-W
A terrorist, here to bring trouble to
Phony MCs, I move on and seize

I just conquer and stomp another rapper with ease

Cause I'm at my apex and others are below

Nothing but a milliliter, I'm a kilo

Second to none, making MCs run

So don't try to step to me, cause I ain't the one

I relieve rappers just like Tylenol

Kane was able to create a vivid and boastful rap that was different from his many predecessors. The reason he was able to compete with Rakim during the time came from the confidence with which Kane executed his words and the thoughtful use of what words that would come next. It was also his cool character that made the way he said his rhymes come off better (Baker). Cool was the word, and Big Daddy Kane embodied the word whenever he dominated the track with his delivery and words.

As the 80s were nearing their end, there was one other group ready who would usher in a new style of rap that didn't completely focus on the complexity of the words they used. Instead, they explored how abrasive they could make their lyrics and fully exerted their right to their freedom of speech. In the process, they set a new precedent of what could and could not be said in music. In the beginning most hip hop, music was coming out from the East Coast, more specifically New York. Most MCs were born and bred in the boroughs (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). However, in the West things were more based around funk and soul music. MC Eiht describes the situation at the time: "In L.A we didn't have history of rap...We didn't wanna come out of Donna summer/K.C and The Sunshine Band era" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). Because of this, there were few rappers around this time, and most of the rap coming out of the West Coast were

comedy tracks. One rapper named Ice-T would help to change it with telling stories of living in the hood, but it wasn't until the group N.W.A came out that "gangsta rap" would be a worldwide phenomenon.

N.W.A was a group based out of Compton, California (Kautz) where life was tough, and much like Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, they set out to tell about the negative things they saw around them. But unlike The Furious 5, N.W.A approached the lyrics that they wrote differently and more unapologetically. At the time, the words of N.W.A were seen as crass and vulgar because their music "included explicit references to gang life, drugs, sex, and distaste for authority, especially the police" (Kautz). However, no one had ever talked about the struggle the way they did. Many saw it as "just some brothers telling the truth about where they came from. Now everybody could see the reality of what gang life was" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). While many would see it as crass, many others felt it was just them telling it how it was, and they used this platform to speak out against injustice during the time. This can be seen best on the track "Fuck The Police":

Fuck the police! Comin' straight from the underground

A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown

And not the other color, so police think

They have the authority to kill a minority

Fuck that shit 'cause I ain't the one

For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun

To be beating on and thrown in jail

We can go toe-to-toe in the middle of a cell

Fuckin' with me 'cause I'm a teenager
With a little bit of gold and a pager
Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product
Thinkin' every nigga is sellin' narcotics

Never had anybody heard aggression against the police and at the time “these lyrics were the subject of the most controversy” (Kautz). N.W.A were ready to push the limits of free speech to the very brink and fight for what they could say. However many would try to combat the group in their attempts to speak their minds, “parents and religious, government and civic leaders decried the music. Most radio stations wouldn’t play it” (Kenyatta 22). At the time N.W.A were telling of the ills that were going on in the areas they had to live in every day. A prime example comes from the song “Dopeman”:

It was once said by a man who couldn't quit
"Dopeman, please can I have another hit?"
The dopeman said, "Cluck, I don't give a shit
If your girl kneeled down, and suck my dick"
It all happened and the guy tried to choke her
Nigga didn't care, she ain't nothin' but a smoker
That's the way goes, that's the name of the game
Young brother gettin' over by slangin' 'caine...
Yo you want a five-oh the dopeman's got plenty
To be a dopeman boy you must qualify
Don't get high off your own supply

From a ki' to a G it's all about money
Ten piece for a champ, bass pipe comes free
If people out there are not hip to the fact
If you see somebody gettin' money for crack
He's the Dopeman! Dopeman!

At the time there were plenty of people who didn't know that drugs were in abundance in the ghettos of America and how much they were destroying the communities there (Kennedy). N.W.A chose not to back down from media or police pressure and even continued to rap the song "Fuck The Police" at a concert where police told them they weren't allowed to perform the song. Instead, they chose to stand by the words that they said and performed the song anyway, because of this the police quickly dispersed to shut down the venue (Hinds). These harsh lyrics and choice of representation of the hood environments in which they were living in would cement N.W.A's place in rap as revolutionary lyricists of their time.

The 90s saw a shift in sound. While still relying very heavily on samples, artists were now pulling new inspiration from jazz samples and bringing in more laid-back styles of rap music. This would be considered by most the "golden era" of hip hop when the genre seemed to be at its peak as the genre's rise into popularity accelerated ("Golden Age Hip-Hop"). In the early years of the 90s new producers such as DJ Premiere, Large Professor, Pete Rock, RZA and Q-Tip helped introduce the world to rap's newest influential lyricists.

During this time many hip-hop acts were either single artists or groups consisting of no more than four rappers. A group from Staten Island would completely shift the idea of rap groups and lyricists. Wu-Tang Clan was a group consisting of nine members: The RZA, The Gza,

Old Dirty Bastard, Inspectah Deck, Raekwon The Chef, U-God Ghostface Killah, Method Man and Mastah Killah (“Wu-Tang Clan Biography”). Prior to them hip hop had never seen a group of this caliber. There were many members, but each was different in their own way. As Raekwon said, “RZA seen the special powers in each one of us and said you’re all fucking different” (*Hip-Hop Revolution*). They were rapping over beats that were rawer than anything heard at the time and all produced by the RZA, Raw would be the main adjective to describe this group from the beats to lyrics like:

I rip it, hardcore like porno-flick bitches
I roll with groups of ghetto bastards with biscuits
Check it, my method on the microphone's bangin'
Wu-Tang slang'll leave your headpiece hangin'
Bust this, I'm kickin' like Seagal: *Out for Justice*
The roughness, yes, the rudeness, ruckus
Redrum, I verbally assault with the tongue
Murder One, my style shocks your knot like a stun gun
I'm hectic, I wreck it with the quickness
Set it on the microphone, and competition get blown
By this nasty-ass nigga with my nigga, the RZA
Charged like a bull and got pulled like a trigga
So bad, stabbin' up the pad with the vocab, crab
I scream on your ass like your dad, bring it on (Inspectah Deck, “Bring Da Ruckus”)

Wu-Tang Clan combined the lyrical talent of a Big Daddy Kane with the coarse unapologetic language of an N.W.A to create a new sound not seen in rap music at the time and making their album *Enter the Wu-Tang* even more eclectic: “That record was as raw as you could ever think, and it was a hit, it wasn’t just a hit it was a smash” (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). They were able to bring attention back to the East Coast. In contrast to West Coast rappers, Wu-Tang “responded by taking a different path, one that shifted away from California's sunshine and gang culture toward a harsher, more menacing and aggressive style that reflected life in Staten Island, the group's home base” (Caballero 1). While N.W.A was able to spark a movement in the West Coast and bring in acts like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Ice Cube as dominant artists in the world of rap (“Wu-Tang Clan Biography”), Wu-Tang were able to bring attention back to the East Coast and usher in a new style to break from the West Coast’s style, while vividly telling about where they lived:

I grew up on the crime side, the *New York Times* side

Stayin' alive was no jive

Had secondhands, Mom's bounced on old man

So then we moved to Shaolin land

A young youth, yo, rockin' the gold tooth, 'Lo goose

Only way I be gettin' the G off was drug loot

And let's start it like this, son

Rollin' with this one and that one

Pullin' out gats for fun

But it was just a dream for the teen who was a fiend

Started smokin' woolies at 16
And runnin' up in gates and doin' hits for high stakes
Makin' my way on fire escapes
No question I would speed for cracks and weed
The combination made my eyes bleed
No question I would flow off and try to get the dough all
Stickin' up white boys in ball courts
My life got no better, same damn 'Lo sweater
Times is rough and tough like leather (Raekwon, "C.R.E.A.M.")

Wu-Tang set themselves apart at the time, and its members would continue to do so with the many solo records they made in the future as well. Kid Capri stated "They all had an identity, that's why they were all able to do their separate deals the way they did" (Hip-Hop Evolution). It was the fact that this group was so versatile and charismatic that helped propel them as lyricists.

Out of this wave of new MCs coming from the east would come a new solo artist backed by many of the hottest producers at the time. Nasir Jones, better known by his MC name Nas, would bring in a style used by many following him. Nas was considered by many to be "the rebirth of Rakim" (Choy). Nas was able to bring back the smooth style and flow with the new wave of production being made at the time. Though his style was considered very smooth, his wordplay was also very clever:

I got it goin' on, even flip a morning song
Every afternoon, I kick half the tune

And in the darkness I'm heartless like when the NARC's hit

Word to Marcus Garvey, I hardly sparked it

'Cause when I blast the herb, that's my word

I be slayin' them fast, doin' this that and the third

But chill, pass the Andre, and let's slay

I bag bitches up at John Jay and hit a matinee

Puttin' hits on 5-0

'Cause when it's my time to go, I wait for God with the .44

And biters can't come near (Nas, "Halftime")

Illmatic was the first album released by Nas at the age of 19, and when many were blown away by the words on the album Rapper Pharoahe Monch described his reaction: "When you heard the project you understood the specialness of this kid; for a first album it seemed so elder statesman at such a young age" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). Nas was considered a top tier wordsmith during his time - especially with the way his words were able to transport people to New York simply with the way he'd describe his world: "it was as if you were dropped into a place you knew you could never go, but you could just see things through the most clear sharp lens" (*Hip-Hop Evolution*). He was able to paint a clear vivid picture with just his words and the beat:

I keep some E&J, sittin' bent up in the stairway

Or either on the corner bettin' Grants with the cee-lo champs

Laughin' at base-heads, tryna sell some broken amps

G-packs get off quick, forever niggas talk shit

Reminisclin' about the last time the task force flipped

Niggas be runnin' through the block shootin'
Time to start the revolution, catch a body, head for Houston
Once they caught us off-guard, the MAC-10 was in the grass, and
I ran like a cheetah, with thoughts of an assassin
Picked the MAC up, told brothers "Back up!" — the MAC spit
Lead was hittin' niggas, one ran, I made him backflip
Heard a few chicks scream, my arm shook, couldn't look
Gave another squeeze, heard it click, "Yo, my shit is stuck!"
Tried to cock it, it wouldn't shoot, now I'm in danger (Nas, "N.Y State of Mind")

Nas was a special league of rapper during his time. However, the very same year an album would be released by another New York artist who is to this day considered one of the greatest to ever pick up a pen and a pad.

In September of '94 the world of hip hop was shaken by The Notorious B.I.G. The Notorious B.I.G, more commonly known as Biggie, was a rapper from Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn who was found by Sean "Diddy" Combs ("Notorious B.I.G Biography"). While many rappers during the time were trying to show how hard their style was or trying to create the rawest rhymes and making music for the streets, Biggie was one of the few who were able to mix the raw rhymes with commercial radio friendly songs, which was something that few MCs prior were able to do skillfully. Lil Cease said, "No other rapper had the guys and the girls. Either you were straight street or you were straight R&B; Big was both and both loved it" (Hip-Hop Evolution). "Juicy" is the prime example of him showing his knowledge of the struggle but telling it in a mainstream way:

Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis

When I was dead broke, man, I couldn't picture this

50-inch screen, money-green leather sofa

Got two rides, a limousine with a chauffeur

Phone bill about two G's flat

No need to worry, my accountant handles that

And my whole crew is loungin'

Celebrating every day, no more public housin'

Thinkin' back on my one-room shack

Now my mom pimps an Ac' with minks on her back

And she loves to show me off of course

Smiles every time my face is up in *The Source*

We used to fuss when the landlord dissed us

No heat, wonder why Christmas missed us

Birthdays was the worst days

Now we sip Champagne when we thirsty

Biggie was also skilled in being honest in the words he spoke and was willing to speak about the darkest corners of his mind, which many prior to him would never have thought to tell their audience. He explains his views on himself and how he detests the way his life is in the song "Suicidal Thoughts":

All my life I been considered as the worst

Lyin' to my mother, even stealin' out her purse

Crime after crime, from drugs to extortion
I know my mother wish she got a fuckin' abortion
She don't even love me like she did when I was younger
(Get a hold of yourself, nigga!)
Suckin' on her chest just to stop my fuckin' hunger
I wonder; if I died, would tears come to her eyes?
Forgive me for my disrespect, forgive me for my lies...
swear to God I want to just slit my wrists and end this bullshit
Throw the Magnum to my head, threaten to pull shit
And squeeze until the bed's completely red
I'm glad I'm dead, a worthless fuckin' buddha head
The stress is buildin' up, I can't— I can't believe
Suicide's on my fuckin' mind, I wanna leave

Most would imagine a song about suicide would talk more about prevention or why someone shouldn't do it. Sahil Patel speaks on Biggie's song by saying "While the hope for songs about suicide is that they end with a positive message, this song is not one of the cases as it maintains the dark theme throughout." This shows how much Biggie wanted to get across the negative aspects of his life. However, Biggie's time in the limelight would not last.

During the mid 90s a beef occurred between Biggie and another very prominent rapper at the time: Tupac Shakur. This would be the pinnacle of conflict between the West Coast and the East Coast: "Pac and Biggie were pitted against each other as their fame, and the genre's popularity, grew across the country" (Gianotta). Sadly, this would end in the deaths of both,

but in 1999, a new rapper would emerge on the scene and change the face of hip hop not only with the words he said but with his look alone.

Backed by Dr. Dre, Marshall Mathers, known as Eminem or Slim Shady, would take the rap game by storm in a different way than his predecessors. Eminem was an anomaly in rap because before him rap was predominantly a black art form and not many white people were rapping. There were a few exceptions like the Beastie Boys and MC Serch, but they weren't able to cause the same commotion that Eminem was able to. For example, he "became the first white person ever to be featured on the cover of *The Source* magazine. This is a magazine that is widely considered the bible of hip-hop music, culture and politics" ("Hip-Hop White Wash"). What made Eminem different from the average MC at the time was the witty way he rhymed his words, which were almost cartoon-like:

Hi, kids, do you like violence? (Yeah, yeah, yeah)

Wanna see me stick nine-inch nails through each one of my eyelids? (Uh-huh)

Wanna copy me and do exactly like I did? (Yeah, yeah)

Try 'cid and get fucked up worse than my life is? (Huh?)

My brain's dead weight, I'm tryna get my head straight

But I can't figure out which Spice Girl I want to impregnate (Oh)

And Dr. Dre said, "Slim Shady, you a basehead" (Uh-uh)

"Then why's your face red? Man, you wasted (Eminem, "My Name Is")

Eminem was able to mix his cartoony style with wordplay that was different for its time.

However, it was not only his wacky style that would capture fans but also how well he was actually able to rhyme. He chose not to simply rely on shock humor to get people to listen but

showed that he was an MC with skill as well. Martin Huxley describes Eminem in the world of rap by saying, “Much has been made over Eminem being white, but his real differences from rappers are more than skin deep” (50). Eminem had more to prove with his skin color being a barrier, but he would show his skill well on the mic:

Slim Shady, brain dead like Jim Brady

I'm a M-80, you little like that Kim lady

I'm buzzin', Dirty Dozen, naughty rotten rhymer

Cursin' at you players worse than Marty Schottenheimer

You wacker than the motherfucker you bit yo' style from

You ain't gon' sell two copies if you press a double album

Admit it, fuck it, while we comin' out in the open

I'm doin' acid, crack, smack, coke, and smokin' dope then

My name is Marshall Mathers, I'm an alcoholic (Hi, Marshall)

I have a disease and they don't know what to call it

Better hide your wallet 'cause I'm comin' up quick to strip yo' cash

Bought a ticket to yo' concert just to come and whip yo' ass

Bitch, I'm comin' out swingin' so fast it'll make yo' eyes spin

You gettin' knocked the fuck out like Mike Tyson (Eminem, “Just Don't Give A Fuck”)

Eminem is considered by many to be the first white rapper to make a shift in the game. Not simply because of the color of his skin but the fact that he was able to rap in a style different from his contemporaries. At the time it was very difficult for a white rapper to be taken seriously, but Eminem has been able to solidify himself amongst the greats.

As the 2000s began so did what many would call “The Bling Era.” This was a time when a lot of mainstream records focused on making club hits and songs were more focused on fun instead of focusing on the negative, and after “the deaths of Biggie and Tupac, two of the genre’s most self-serious emcees, the game-changing Bling Era diverted attention and offered a much-needed distraction from the tragedies of 9/11 and the subsequent Iraq War” (Hinz). During this time, artists like 50 Cent, Lil Wayne, and The Game rose to popularity. While these rappers were skilled, most people weren’t looking to the mainstream to find the top tier lyricists. This would be the time when focus would shift to underground hip hop for lyricists, and the underground would produce an MC who is considered one of the most clever in the game and often called “your favorite rapper’s favorite rapper” (Cam).

Daniel Dumile is an MC from New York who originally went by the name Zev Love X in the group KMD during the 90s. However, after the death of his brother, who was known as Sub-Rock in the group, Dumile was absent from the rap scene for a while until he reemerged as the MC known as MF Doom. In 1999 he released his project *Operation Doomsday*, but it wouldn’t be until later in his career that his lyricism would be understood and appreciated with albums like *Mm.. Food* and *Madvillainy*. The latter, released in 2004, set his status in the world of rap (Coates.) Doom is mostly known for his off-kilter flow on songs and the weird way he puts words together. Since his character was partially based off the character Dr. Doom from *The Fantastic Four* comics (Gabbles 1), he often uses the rhymes to set up stories that build lore around the character he has created:

Tripping off the beat kinda, dripping off the meat grinder

Heat niner, pimping, stripping, soft sweet minor

China was a neat signer, trouble with the script
Digits double dipped, bubble lipped, subtle lisp midget
Borderline schizo, sort of fine tits though
Pour the wine, whore to grind, quarter to nine, let's go
Ever since ten eleven, glad she made a brethren
Then it's last down, seven alligator seven, at the gates of heaven
Knocking, no answer, slow dancer, hopeless romancer, dopest flow stanzas
Yes, no? Villain, Metal face to Destro
Guess so, still incredible in escrow
Just say "Ho!" I'll test the yayo
Wild West style fest, y'all best to lay low (MF Doom, "Meat Grinder")

Doom was also very well known for the unusual patterns he would take over rap songs. While the average MC would attack a verse straight forward, Doom would often bend words and use unusual words when rhyming, which made the verses he created different than anyone else's: "Doom created vivid imagery by the use of descriptive storytelling and strange off key vocals. He was a supreme lyricist who had clearly taken his time to strategize a new plan for his career" (Patrick). This type of mastery can be seen on the track "All Caps":

So nasty that it's probably somewhat of a travesty
Having me, then he told the people "You can call me, Your Majesty!"
Keep your battery charged, you know it won't
Stick yo, and it's not his fault you kick slow
Should've let your trick ho chick hold your sick glow

Plus nobody couldn't do nothin' once he let the brick go
And you know I know that's a bunch of snow
The beat is so butter, Peep the slow cutter
As he utter the calm flow ("Your mother—"), don't talk about my moms, yo
Sometimes he rhyme quick, sometimes he rhyme slow
Or vice versa, whip up a slice of nice verse pie
Hit it on the first try, villain: the worst guy
Spot hot tracks like spot a pair of fat asses

Doom has become come respected in many circles as one of the best MCs ever and is a living legend in the rap game for his clever lyrics and unique flow that he has changed on many different albums to fit the beats he chooses to rap over. Through his songs, he has “crafted a world of his own that's invited a cult following of fans like no other rap artist...Whether it be a concept album or left-field collaborations DOOM's world is one of a kind” (Fuertes-Knight). His ever changing style has truly helped Doom become an MC of high regard.

In hip hop today, there is currently a divide because in the mainstream there are plenty of people who would say the art is dying. Brian Brewington states, “I don’t know when it happened but somewhere along the lines, the music changed. It lost its meaning and feeling. It stopped being about the talent and culture” (insert citation). Many would call these rappers “mumble rappers,” and some would even argue that hip hop overall is plummeting as a genre because of this, which causes many debates between the old guard and the new rappers of today. However, lyricism in rap is still very much alive today, and it can be seen through many MCs such as Kendrick Lamar, Tyler the Creator, Earl Sweatshirt, J.I.D and others. With rap being

the most popular genre of music out right now (Lynch), there is still plenty of time for it grow and many more lyricists to be born and tell their stories in their own way. As we have been able to see hip hop has changed from being spoken in the parks to being played on large stages. As the genre continues to evolve, so will the lyricists who will come in the future.

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