

The Relationship Between Rap-Metal and Hip-Hop

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December 10, 2002

DeFrantz, Hip-Hop Final Paper

Bristling with anticipation, the crowd of thousands pumped their fists in attempt to bring their ringleaders to the stage. Shifting from the hypnotic chant of “Rage! Rage! Rage!” to a unified sea of jumping youth, the students of Mexico City shouted in excitement upon seeing their instigators taking the stage and proceeded to go absolutely insane for the next hour. From songs whose lyrical content exposed the United States’ dependence on oil to the Zapatista movement in Southern Mexico to the false imprisonments of Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal, Rage Against the Machine’s crowds respond in the same way. Whether they were American, Mexican, Dutch, English, Japanese, or anything in between, these motivated youth take out their fury against the systems that seem to work against them. They might not personally be “Born of a Broken Man” or “People of the Sun,” but they have the same feelings of resentment and betrayal towards a system that has left them marginalized and powerless.

The proliferation of rap-metal (or rap-rock, nü-metal) acts in mainstream music charts during the late nineties was the maturation of a style first birthed by the all-star collaboration of “Walk This Way” by Run DMC and Aerosmith and Anthrax’s “I’m the Man” in the late eighties. Coupled with this proliferation was the question of rap-metal’s place in America’s musical landscape and its association both with hip-hop and with heavy metal. While the correlation between rap-metal and heavy metal are complex in terms of rock evolution, the relationship between rap-metal and hip-hop requires a more nuanced analysis.

The establishment of rap-metal brings forth a number of central issues with which hip-hop concerns itself. One of the primary concerns comes through the question of whiteness in its relation to hip-hop. While this analysis traditionally comes through the examination of various white rappers and their immersion in the prototypical hip-hop world, such an approach is insufficient because most rap-metal groups do not function

within the constructs of the hip-hop world. Alternatively, most acts tour together on traditionally heavy metal circuits and have a predominately white male audience.

Also central to understanding the relationship between hip-hop and rap-metal are investigation of rap-metal's use of consumerism and its use of musicality and liveness. The intended audience for most hip-hop and rap-metal differ in that the hip-hop community markets a majority of its produced material towards a core of ethnically-marginalized urban youth, while rap-metal initially targets disaffected suburban youth and white urban youth. The differing structures of the different scenes also produce different attitudes towards liveness and its importance. While most hip-hop and rock acts are either party (club) or battle-oriented, rap-metal acts mainly perform in concert venues, varying in size from bar rooms which seat dozens to stadiums and festivals which seat the tens of thousands. Because of the difference in exchange between the performer and the audience, the audience has different expectations for the rap-metal group, resulting in different paradigms of performance for most rap-metal acts.

The connection between hip-hop and rap-metal is complex and analysis of this association has created different models explaining this relationship. Considering the historical relationship between white American popular music and its black counterparts, some consider the phenomenon of rap-metal as simply another instance of white artists stealing aural inventions from blacks in order to make a profit producing inauthentic representations of original black music. Alternatively, some argue that the rap-metal scene in suburban America is analogous to hip-hop scenes outside America, like those in Japan and Europe, which incorporate innovations made by hip-hop in the United States to the hip-hop music and culture produced on a local level. While both theories hold some merit, the rap-metal culture throughout the United States is not a simple model of either of these analyses. Rather, rap-metal serves as an authentic output of a white audience that consumes hip-hop; but rather than simply mimicking and already

established style, rap-metal incorporates the musical innovations and urban attitude present in hip-hop in order to voice the same mind-set on music present in the white suburban communities.

In "The Local Economy of Suburban Scenes," Donna Gaines illustrated the local social structure found in most American suburbs and the how this structure spawned various subcultural musical scenes. Gaines used the example of the changing hardcore, death-metal and speed metal scenes found in Long Island during the late eighties to examine how these communities formed and how they were important for the youth culture in these suburban areas. Gaines concluded that most subcultural scenes in the area formed for two reasons. The most obvious reason was for the majority of young people in these areas find a solution to "the problem of 'nothing to do, nowhere to go', an ancient tradition" (Gaines, 47). The other, most important reason for these scenes was for the disaffected youth of an area to regain a community lost due to the (relative) geographic and psychological isolation created by the setup of most suburbs. Through the avenues such as the hardcore scene, suburban youth were able to enact in activities other than barely hanging on in high school and mindlessly working at low-end service jobs.

Much as hip-hop did for urban youth, the metal scenes, which would later evolve into the rap-metal scenes, spoke to people who were marginalized by their society. Whereas most see reasons for black urban youth to feel such marginalization, the reasons for the outlook of alienation found in most rap-metal listeners are not as intuitive. In the areas where hip-hop is usually created, a vast majority of those in the society are outcasts from the mainstream culture. Most historians and performers like Afrika Bambaataa describe the near-universal bleak sentiment felt by most, assuming they could never rise from their social position. Alternatively, the population that inhabits the suburbs is higher in social status. Most cannot see why the son of a doctor and a

lawyer in a \$300,000 home would possibly complain about his status in life. According to this, if hip-hop was the delicate mix between the fantasy of what you have and the reality of what you need, then all that rap-metal could possibly attain was the fantasy, tipping the contextual balance and making a disingenuous product.

Of course, rap-metal does have a conscience. Though not as blatantly political as its parents in hardcore and hip-hop, rap-metal talks about the issues pertaining its intended audience. Note the verses in the song “Back to School (Mini Maggit)” by the Deftones from their 2000 LP, *White Pony*:

...  
 Back, I sift through all the cliques,  
 Roaming the halls all year, making me sick.  
 While everyone's out tryin' to make the cut, what?  
 And when you think you know me, right, I switch it up.  
 Behind the wall, smoking cigarettes and sipping vodka;  
 Hop a fence and catch a cab, ain't no one can stop us.  
 Give me a break, I'm on some other mess  
 While you act like it's everything you've got!  
 ...  
 Stop that, quit! All that, quit! Who ruined it?  
 You did, now grab a notebook and a pen.  
 Start taking notes, On me and everyone who's on the top  
 You think we're on the same page, but I know we're not.  
 I'll be the man, watch your backpack, pens and pencils  
 Just like Keith now flippin it, while you just keep it simple.  
 You just can't go on, rockin' the clothes, coppin the stance  
 Cause really is everything that you're not!  
 ...

Here, the Deftones comment on the social hierarchies found in most high schools in suburban America. In comparison to a hip-hop song like Dead Prez's “They’ Schools,” the subject matter may seem pedestrian. While the Deftones are complaining about suffering through an authoritative high school and poseurs in the scene, Dead Prez is trying to speak to the black youth in high school in order to initiate structural change in the public school system. However, both groups are addressing immediate concerns; critics only penalize the Deftones because their concerns do not seem as urgent or dire.

A group that did mix traditional message rap with metal was the aforementioned leftist group, Rage Against the Machine. While most of their brethren steered clear of political action in their lyrics, Rage Against the Machine mixed every song with equal amounts of punk and blues influenced sound with a rapped sloganeering. Like one of their main influences, Public Enemy, RATM used raps to try to enact changes in the system. Most political rappers like Public Enemy and Dead Prez mix very large-scale issues like public school reform to more personal issues like eating a healthy diet (Dead Prez's "Be Healthy, *Let's Get Free*). Conversely, Rage Against the Machine remains on a macro-level throughout most of their music; their smallest scale issues calling for the respective releases of Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal. As a result, the group seems to abstract for many of its audience. To quote Valerie Agnew (drummer to the punk group 7 Year Bitch), "the fratboys were just singing along with rebellion and did *not* get the message at all" (Nehring, xxi). Thus, the balance between conscious and banal lyrics differs between rap-metal and hip-hop. One result of the higher social status associated with most rap-metal listeners is a distance between the audience and communal issues which outsiders would consider important.

The community centered on rap-metal also shaped the structure of the music itself. The formulation of the MC (later rapper) came from the need to maintain the flow of the party while the DJ made changes, preserving the flow for the club goers, who danced continuously. This follows the precedent set by earlier genres of funk and disco, which emphasized continual dance and a club setting. Alternatively, the bars and venues that housed hardcore and funk-metal acts birthed rap-metal. As a result, most rap-metal follows the paradigms set by these earlier musical styles. For example, the issue of liveness is much different in the rap-metal world than it is with hip-hop. Most hip-hop is not suited for a concert-style performance, as many concertgoers note. The same tricks used in the club by the DJ or in a battle by the rapper do not scale well when

the artist is the entire focus of the audience for an extended period. Rap-metal, instead, continually works in a concert setting, with the only change being the scale of the concert venue. As a result, the same liveness translates better.

For example, the rap-rock group N.E.R.D. released a rendition of the single “Lapdance” from their album *In Search Of...* using mediated instrumentation. However, when the group performed the same single on MTV’s *Live from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*, they dropped as much mediation as possible and instead used live instrumentation, with heavy emphasis on guitar riffs, to play in a live setting. While this group in particular comes from the hip-hop side of rap-metal, they were greatly influenced by live performances by earlier groups, such as Limp Bizkit and earlier rap-rock collaborations, like Puff Daddy and David Grohl’s remix of “All About the Benjamin’s.” Here, most rap-metal artists take the best of both worlds by mixing the rhythm-driving breakbeats of hip-hop with the live experience of metal in order to create a new energy greater than any found in either subgenre.

While each scene in both hip-hop and rap-metal has its own particular flavor, the mainstream acceptance of rap-metal resulted in attempts to unify disparate camps of listeners. Arion Berger tries to summarize the scene when he writes:

Now we call the sound metal-rap or rapcore, or hip-rock, or gangsta thrash, but all the names mean one thing: this is music by, for, and about the young, angry and imaginative. Regardless of race or color, gender or religion, it’s an elite democracy of the thoroughly pissed-off. It is not for everyone. ...the young and rowdy, the loud and snotty, the furious bands and masta pimps...(Berger, 10)

Like their hip-hop counterparts, rap-metal incorporated styles rooted in local traditions in order to build a national identity. This mainly took the form of streamlining fashion throughout the scene. Although many of the artists dressed as wildly as possible, many

fans in the audience were clothes fashioned after the So-Cal skater. The baseball cap, hoodie, chino pants, and sneakers were a universal trend throughout the audiences of rap-metal. This uniformity meant that youth in the scene attained individuality through different associations. While fans that are more radical would go through the process of dreading their hair (no small feat for white youths) or in the case of the Insane Clown Posse's Juggalos, painting their faces kabuki style (Berger, 76), most gain their individuality through consumable products. From T-shirts and posters to tattoos and Kid Rock's red fedora, the rap-metal scene promotes healthy amounts of consumption along with their music. While a good majority of this consumption takes place within the community, the consumption shifted towards corporate products with relative ease once the music hit the mainstream.

The wild success of rap-metal can mean two things in terms of hip-hop and consumerism. Either rap-metal serves as a complement to a consumer that already listens to traditional hip-hop and heavy metal, or rap-metal serves as a replacement for those genres, dissuading potential customers from hearing hip-hop in its purest form. An interesting observation is those who assume that rap-metal serves as a replacement for hip-hop also assume that the intended audience should not be the intended audience for hip-hop. Alternatively, most who assume rap-metal is complements to hip-hop also feel hip-hop should be more inclusive in their intended audience. With this correlation, rap-metal serves a useful purpose in its relation to hip-hop.

The emergence of rap-metal has altered the way in which hip-hop perceives whiteness in relation to the music. Whiteness and hip-hop is no longer comes solely in the form of the "wigger," the white person who tries to mimic black culture and black idioms, mainly associating with black culture despite the fact that one is not black. Rather, rap-metal serves white people that regularly consume black culture without trying to imitate it. Now, hip-hop must consider whiteness in terms of both imitation and



transformation. Although hip-hop artists produce their material for an intended audience, the interpretation of the material differs depending on the group consuming it (Nehring, xxi). In terms of rap-metal, the audience receives the material differently, and this differing reception leads to differing production. Taking an example from speed-metal, homeless youth interpret Metallica's "Enter the Sandman" nightmarish lyrics as a metaphor to their daily struggles, while middle-class fans interpret the lyrics as merely descriptions of nightmares (Kotarba, 159). The same type of interaction happens in hip-hop music. While the intended audience connects on a personal level to the songs of DMX, the auxiliary audience that does not share the same reality, projects a new reality upon the same content and consumes it differently. While some artists may not appreciate deviant interpretation of their work, the alternative understanding of hip-hop by the rap-metal audience follows the precedent set by hip-hop, which itself altered the meaning of original performances.

The relationship between rap-metal and hip-hop is one of great complexity. Rap-metal's existence serves as evidence of the ever-expanding audience of hip-hop music. Some consider this style of music a bastardization of two musical genres, sacrificing artistry in both genres in order to reach the largest audience by combining two disparate styles. Rap-metal regularly consumes hip-hop media and unlike previous incarnations of white people in a black scene, does not try to simply mimic the material. Instead, rap-metal artists incorporate the musical structure of hip-hop into music already present in their communities, namely heavy metal. Along these same lines, these artists use the lyrical flow of rapping to alternate between classic boasting and toasting and personal issues important to the subcultural community. The presence of the metal scene in suburban communities altered the connection between the audience and the artists, as most of the interaction took place in a concert setting. Because of this main interaction through concerts, rap-metal scaled well on a larger level, and more traditional rap acts

incorporated the liveness associated with rap-metal acts into their live performances. When rap-metal hit the national stage, the community used consumption to create both unity and individuality within its members. For rap-metal's intended audience, the musical genre serves as an authentic output of black culture consumed by a white audience that incorporates the attitude and musical innovations of hip-hop into already established musical culture within the suburban community.

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