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Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

Hip-hop planet

By James McBride

I first heard rap at a party in Harlem in 1980. It sounded like a broken record. It was a version of an old hit record called *Good Times*, the same four bars looped over and over. And on top of this loop, a kid chanted a rhyme about how he was the best disc jockey in the world. It was called *Rapper’s Delight*. I thought it was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard.

For the next 26 years, I avoided rap music the way you step over a crack in the pavement. I heard it booming out of cars and alleyways from Paris to Abidjan, but I never listened. In doing so, I missed the most important cultural event in my lifetime. No American music has exploded across the world with such force since swing jazz in the 1930s. This defiant culture of song, graffiti and dance, collectively known as hip-hop, has permeated almost every society.

Hip-hop began in the mid-1970s, in an almost bankrupt New York City. The bored kids of the South Bronx and Harlem came up with a new entertainment. This is how it worked: one guy, the DJ, played records on two turntables. Another guy – or girl – served as master of ceremonies, or MC. The DJs learnt to move the record back and forth under the needle to create a *scratch*, or to drop the needle on the record and play a *break* over and over to keep people dancing. The MCs rapped over the music to keep the party going. One MC sought to out-chat the other. Dance styles were created. Graffiti artists also emphasised the I because the music was all about identity: I am the best.

Initially hip-hop artists produced socially-conscious songs that described life on the other side of the tracks, where people are denied the same opportunities as the rich. The lyrics of Grandmaster Flash’s 1982 hit *The Message* are a perfect example.

They describe a child who is born and grows up in the ghetto, hating the world for his situation and all the things that he cannot have.

These days most commercial rappers in America brag about their lives of crime and the things that fame and money have brought them, among which women seem to be just another material possession. For those from poor backgrounds the life of a successful rapper has become an aspiration, for richer suburban kids it is a symbol of something cool.

In poor urban communities around the globe, rap music is a universal expression of outrage at the injustice of the distribution of wealth. Its macho pose has been borrowed from commercial hip-hop in the US, but for most the music represents an old dream: a better life. ‘We want money to help our parents,’ Assane, a nineteen-year-old budding DJ from Dakar in Senegal tells me. ‘We watch our mothers boil water to cook and have nothing to put in the pot. Rap doesn’t belong to American culture,’ he says. ‘It belongs here. It has always existed here, because of our pain and our hardships and our suffering.’

That is why, after 26 years, I have come to embrace this music I tried so hard to ignore. Much of hip-hop, particularly the commercial side, I hate. Yet I love the good of it. Even if some of it embraces violence, hip-hop is a music that exposes the empty moral cupboard that we have left for our children. They can hear it and understand it. The question is: can we?

brag (v) /brag/ speak proudly about your achievements

defiant (adj) /dɪˈfaɪənt/ challenging or opposing another’s authority

looped (adj) /luːpt/ repeated without a break

out-chat (v) /ˌaʊt ˈʧat/ chat longer or better than another

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